

"A RELISH FOR ETERNITY":
THE PROCESS OF DIVINIZATION IN THE POETRY OF
JOHN CLARE

A thesis
submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the
University of Canterbury

by
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University of Canterbury

1975

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"A relish for eternity": the process of divinization
in the poetry of John Clare.

ABSTRACT

Clare has been highly praised as a purely descriptive poet, but the faithful representation of rural life and scenery is not the sum of his work. In this thesis I consider his achievement as a poet of the "visionary" as well as of the "visual", and I have approached the topic by relating his loving attention to "trifles" to his endeavour to give permanence to a local Eden which is threatened by enclosure and social change. By examining in chapters one and two Clare's organization of images (guided by his sense of the poet's mission to see what others fail to notice), I have shown that he is concerned not simply to record for posterity the natural history of a place, but also, through the power of "fancy", to translate mundane sights into glimpses of paradise. In chapters three to five I discuss each of Clare's three main themes (the past, Nature, and Woman) in terms of what I have called "the process of divinization" (the growing reverence for earthly beauty as the type of Eternity), and in chapter six I consider Poesy as the visitation of the divinity in Man, the inspiration to capture in song the harmony of Creation. In the course of these chapters I examine the strictures against descriptive poetry, Clare's attitude to "botanizing", the tension between fact and fancy, the myths

of Childhood and Solitude, the topography and typology of Eden, natural religion and natural morality, Clare's place in the georgic and Romantic traditions, and the interrelationship between Nature, Love, Poesy, and God. Clare's "relish for eternity" I see as affording a consistent and unifying quest in his poetry, and I argue that his descriptive genius is valuable not only for its own sake but also for its communication of his Edenic vision.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the University of Canterbury for providing me with a Teaching Fellowship for the two years during which I have been engaged in writing this thesis. To the staff of the English Department I am indebted for much encouragement and friendly interest, and I wish to record in particular my thanks to Professor K.K. Ruthven for the availability of his bibliographical expertise. The staff of the University Library have also been at all times helpful and diligent.

My greatest debt is to my supervisor, Professor J.C. Garrett, from whom I have received not only the benefit of unfailing scholarship but also the favour of unreserved friendship.

G.D. Crossan.

INTRODUCTION

Approaching a critical encounter with the poetry of John Clare is rather like preparing oneself to run the gauntlet. The critics seemed lined up in two columns, confident in the knowledge that the pen is mightier than the tomahawk. A closer inspection, however, will show that there is a considerable amount of dissension in the ranks, and that to be fore-warned of this may be to some extent fore-armed. My aim is to run a straight course down the middle, and to leave the critics to cudgel each other.

The dissension, confusion, and contradictions which have plagued Clare criticism have their origins in Clare's life itself. W.K. Richmond is one of many who have pointed out that: "Socially, the poet fell between two stools. For the sake of his art he had become an outcast among his own kind: and the city intellectuals regarded him as an interesting freak, or when the novelty of his first acquaintance was done, discarded him."¹

¹ W.K. Richmond, Poetry and the People (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947), p. 158; rpt. Mark Storey, ed., Clare: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 388. (References to reprinted material in the Critical Heritage Series hereafter cited as "Storey".)

Clare himself surveys his career in two poignant lines:

My life hath been one love — no blot it out
My life hath been one chain of contradictions,²
(LPJC, 40)

From the first there was something so extraordinary about the phenomenon of a peasant writing poetry as to make critics want to plead either for or against special literary standards, just as many of the editors of eighteenth-century ballad collections felt constrained to apologize for their "trash". Clare's plea in the Prospectus printed by Henson in 1818 was an encouragement to those who decided to make allowances: "It is hoped that the humble situation which distinguishes their author will be some excuse in their favour, and serve to make an atonement for the many inaccuracies and imperfections that will be found in them."³ A notice of Clare's first volume in the Monthly Magazine, 1820, puts the case precisely: "Considered as the productions of a common labourer, they are certainly remarkable, and deserving of encouragement and commendation: but, to maintain that they have the smallest pretensions to comparative excellence with the writings of others out of his own sphere, would be ridiculous and unjust, and would be trying them by a poetical law from which they ought to be exempt."⁴ The British Critic hailed the

² For key to abbreviations see "Abbreviations of Textual Sources".

³ Prospectus, printed J.B. Henson of Market Deeping,
1818; Storey p. 30.

⁴ Monthly Magazine, March 1820, 164; Storey p. 76.

"circumstances of the writer" as the "principal merit" of the same book,⁵ and the precedent was set for a spate of patronising, over-indulgent, and sometimes thoroughly sentimental reviews. R.H. Stoddard appraised Clare's work in these terms in 1893: "It is not the kind of poetry to criticize, for it is full of faults, but to read generously and tenderly, remembering the lowly life of Clare, his want of education, his temptations, his struggles, his sorrow and suffering, and his melancholy end."⁶ In our own century Edmund Blunden has suggested special critical standards for peasant poets,⁷ and James Reeves has maintained: "[Clare] cannot be censured for the profusion of his output nor, in the circumstances, for the inequality of its worth."⁸ Perhaps the Tibbles have been hardest censured for over-indulgence. Of their first biography of Clare one critic remarks: "In 1932 Professor and Mrs. Tibble were Georgian about Clare ... Their biography, to be critical, was quite obviously uncritical, transcripts were altogether unreliable, and Clare had to survive (which he was well able to do) a confusion of himself with Miss Patience Strong."⁹ This is hard to reconcile with an earlier reviewer's statement

⁵ British Critic, June 1820, 662-7; Storey p. 103.

⁶ R.H. Stoddard, Under the Evening Lamp (London: Gay and Bird, 1893), pp. 132-3; Storey p. 299.

⁷ See Rayner Unwin, The Rural Muse (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954), pp. 58-9.

⁸ James Reeves, introduction to Selected Poems of John Clare (London: Heinemann, 1954), p. xv.

⁹ Times Literary Supplement, 27 April 1956, 252; Storey pp. 417-18.

that: "Nowhere has enthusiasm been allowed to distort truth, nor romance to conceal hard fact."¹⁰

Those who have denied Clare the right to special criteria have taken their cue from his Preface to The Shepherd's Calendar, where he revokes his former plea: "I hope my low station in life will not be set off as a foil against my verses, and I am sure I do not wish to bring it forward as an excuse for any imperfections that may be found in them."¹¹ Just as the apologetic approach tended to lead to extravagant praise, so the analytic attack tended to over-severity. Edmund Gosse justly remarked of Southey's Uneducated Poets that the peasant bards "were praised not so much for doing their poetry well as for doing it at all. In the patronage they received there was something of the attention given to a learned pig at a fair."¹² His own account of Clare, however, is an over-reaction in its assertion that: "There is not one startling felicity, one concentrated ray, in the whole body of his work." For Gosse the naive piping of "Tootle, tootle, tootle, tee!" was "the sum of John Clare's poetry from boyhood to the grave."¹³ Clare admitted of his verses in 1818 that: "The least touch from the iron hand of Criticism is able to crush them to nothing...",¹⁴ and recent critics, surveying some of the

¹⁰ Bookman, July 1932, 212.

¹¹ Clare's Preface to The Shepherd's Calendar, 1827; Storey pp. 200-1.

¹² Sunday Times, 5 Oct. 1924, 8; rpt. E. Gosse, Silhouettes (London: Heinemann, 1925), p. 103.

¹³ Sunday Times, 23 Jan. 1921, 5; Storey pp. 344-6.

¹⁴ Prospectus, 1818; Storey p. 30.

crushings Clare has received, have appealed against dissecting the rainbow. A reviewer in 1956 felt compelled to protest that Clare "strips away certain current pretensions about verse-reading as an intellectual exercise and not a central experience",¹⁵ and Cecil Day Lewis suggested in 1965 that Clare's poetry demands not an analytical mind but "an act of submission", noting that: "Such an act of submission may be difficult for a modern reader, habituated by the earnestness or officiousness of literary critics to believe that no poem is worthwhile unless a fine dust of footnotes can be beaten out of it."¹⁶ Concerning the two extremes of molly-coddling and brow-beating it is perhaps best to let Clare speak for himself: "Criticisms overflowing with milk & honey are as vain as those of the reptile uttering nothing but the venom of gall & bitterness."¹⁷

The circumstances of Clare's life which have contributed to this critical anomaly have been too often described to want repetition here. His career is a biographer's dream, being full of incident, rich in pathos, sufficiently distant in time to avoid offence to many who would seem to have failed to sustain him, and still sufficiently "undiscovered" to allow of new discoveries. Most of the critical writings on Clare are (understandably) saturated

¹⁵ Times Literary Supplement, 27 April 1956, 252; Storey p. 421.

¹⁶ C. Day Lewis, The Lyric Impulse (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 117.

¹⁷ Clare to Hessey, Aug. 1823, in J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Letters of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 153.

with biography, though Naomi Lewis could write even in 1964 that: "It is curious that Clare's story hasn't attracted more biographical attention."¹⁸ Writers of review articles have generally made much of his madness (an attraction which has done much for the likes of Hölderlin, Van Gogh, and Schumann), or of his peasant background (in line with Bloomfield and Burns), or both (with the former contingent on the latter). Clare certainly bewailed the "peasant poet" or "child of nature" image, remarking to Mrs. Emerson in 1832 that all he desired was "to stand on my bottom as a poet without any apology as to want of education or anything else",¹⁹ but he equally certainly contributed to its currency. It was inevitable that he should be seen in the context of the host of labourer-poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and we are apt to forget just how widespread a phenomenon this was. Horace Walpole wrote to Hannah More in 1784 that after Stephen Duck "twenty artisans and labourers turned poets and starved",²⁰ and in 1821 the British Critic was complaining that: "Nothing is more easy than for any person, of moderate talents, be his situation in life what it may, who can read and write, and is in possession of Thomson's Seasons and Beattie's Minstrel... to cultivate a talent for

¹⁸ Encounter, Sept. 1964, 74.

¹⁹ Clare to Mrs. Emerson, 13 Nov. 1832, in Letters (Tibbles, 1951), p. 275; Storey p.218. Cf. Letters p. 100.

²⁰ Walpole to Hannah More, 13 Nov. 1784, in Mrs. Toynbee, ed., Letters of Horace Walpole (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), p. 215.

making verses."²¹ Another thirty years later Mary Russell Mitford felt urged to warn the public: "Let us beware of indulging ourselves by encouraging the class of pseudo-peasant poets who spring up on every side, and are amongst the most pitiable objects in creation."²² It was inevitable also that our post-Freudian age should want to concentrate on the poems of Clare's madness, and of this emphasis Radcliffe Squires is representative: "...from the instability of the artist the great stability of art may come. It is a little like Samson's discovering honey in the disintegrating carcass of the lion."²³ Nineteenth-century views of the asylum poems are sadly unenthusiastic, doubting whether they should even have been published, but our own century has shown an undue preference for this work, a preference which has only recently been challenged. Donald Davie made the point in 1964: "There will always be sophisticated philistines who prefer, for diagnostic or more dubious reasons, the poems which poets write when out of their wits to the ones they write with their wits about them."²⁴ Such has been the attention created by these two aspects of Clare's life that Ian Jack has justly remarked: "If Clare had never lived it would have been tempting to invent him, for he conforms

²¹ British Critic, June 1821, 660-1; Storey p. 118.

²² M.R. Mitford, Recollections of a Literary Life (London: Bentley, 1883), p. 114.

²³ Victorian Studies, March 1966, 291-2.

²⁴ New Statesman, 19 June 1964, 964; Storey p. 440.

remarkably to the romantic stereotype of The Poet."²⁵

We must weigh this, however, against the caution of his editors Robinson and Summerfield: "Clare was never what his critics would like him to have been."²⁶

It is doubtful whether Clare's work will ever be seen independently of his life. In 1954 James Reeves re-directed readers to the poetry itself: "Too much attention has been focused on his life, and too much vicarious sympathy expended on a poet dead for nearly a century by those who would be as little help to him, were he living, as the mass of his contemporaries were."²⁷ Two years later a reviewer was able to state confidently: "Clare's origin would hardly seem to matter or cause concern any more",²⁸ perhaps forgetting that much the same thing had been said by Alan Porter in 1920.²⁹ The reason for my doubts will be apparent when I record Josiah Conder's plea on behalf of Clare's poems in 1820, that "instead of thinking them very clever considering they are by a day labourer, our readers agree with us in conceding

²⁵ Ian Jack, "Poems of John Clare's Sanity" in Some British Romantics (Ohio State University Press, 1966), p. 191.

²⁶ E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, introduction to Clare: Selected Poems and Prose (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 33.

²⁷ Reeves, ed. cit. (note 8), p. xviii.

²⁸ Times Literary Supplement, 27 April 1956, 252; Storey p. 418.

²⁹ Oxford Outlook, May 1920, 202-9; Storey p. 321.

to them a high degree of poetical merit quite independent of the circumstances of their Author..."³⁰

This has been by no means the only area of controversy, and Mark Storey's recent collection of Clare criticism in the Critical Heritage Series has been most useful in delineating the major currents and shifts of thought. I do not propose to paraphrase Storey's survey of opinion on Clare; I simply note his remark that: "It is only after Symons that the critical heritage begins to cohere",³¹ and place this alongside a claim by Oliver Elton: "Mr Symons was the first critic, I think, to value Clare in the right way and for the right things, and there is not much to say after him",³² as one example of how unsettled Clare criticism has been. What is perhaps most noticeable from Storey's survey is the number of scholars in the nineteenth-century field who have not mentioned Clare, rather than the number who have. It is not even certain that Clare is entitled to any further discussion. A reviewer of Storey's volume has firmly put Clare in his place as a "minor poet", and "a minor poet finds his voice almost at once and does not change it ... The minor poet is frozen in criticism too, which does not modify or revalue or expand him, whereas the great poet lives in

³⁰ Eclectic Review, April 1820, 327-40; Storey p. 90.

³¹ Mark Storey, ed., Clare: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 18.

³² Oliver Elton, Survey of English Literature, 1780-1830 (London: Arnold, 1912), p. 426.

criticism, which is continually reinterpreting him..."³³
 Both sides of this argument also had an airing in the
 1820's.

Other major areas of controversy will be discussed as
 they arise in the course of my thesis, but it may be as
 well to record some of the side-issues at this point,
 since the cultivation of my own notions will leave little
 time for weeding other men's gardens. In discussing
 the plethora of contradictions in Clare criticism in 1972,
 Anne Tibble recalls Edmund Blunden's phrase "a puzzling
 profusion of good and bad critiques", and goes on to
 summarize some of these:

Since 1920, one writer thinks he is too well
 read in the poets of the eighteenth century,
 and imitates them continually; another notes
 the immense gulf which divides him from these
 same poets. To one his poetry is 'mere
 picturesque description'; another sees in him
 always 'a poet of the spirit'. One finds 'no
 principle of inner growth'; another comments
 on the 'continuous growth of the poet's mind,
 strangely crowned in the Asylum period'. We
 read of the 'pure imagination of a hundred
 enchanting phrases', and of 'not one startling
 felicity, one concentrated ray in the whole
 body of his work'.³⁴

It is not difficult to proliferate such examples. James
 Reeves felt that "his qualities are not epitomised in
 brief, quotable lyrics",³⁵ while Rayner Unwin and others
 have commented that "Clare is never at his best in a

³³ Times Literary Supplement, 27 July 1973, 856.

³⁴ J.W. and Anne Tibble, John Clare, A Life (second
 edn., London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. xvi.

³⁵ Reeves, ed. cit. (note 8), p. xii.

sustained poem."³⁶ Unwin also found Clare's sonnets the least satisfactory of his works,³⁷ whereas Conder remarked that he handled the sonnet as well as if he had invented it.³⁸ Geoffrey Grigson has reminded us of how uneven Clare's work is in quality,³⁹ while an anonymous reviewer of a Grigson edition of Clare considers that "the very evenness of quality in his verse makes selection difficult."⁴⁰ The Tibble two-volume edition of the poems in 1935 was particularly productive of contradictions. To John Speirs it seemed unlikely that the edition would help Clare's cause because it showed up his failures,⁴¹ but a later review in the Times Literary Supplement was hopeful that readers would want "the experience of following him through all his work."⁴² P. Tomlinson wrote: "Quality is not overwhelmed in the quantity of these crowded volumes",⁴³ in direct opposition to K. John's assertion that "Clare fills up the tea-pot again and again, and never seems to notice that the beverage

³⁶ Unwin, op. cit. (note 7), p. 134.

³⁷ Unwin, op. cit. (note 7), p. 132.

³⁸ Eclectic Review, Jan. 1822, 31-45; Storey p. 171.

³⁹ Geoffrey Grigson, introduction to Poems of John Clare's Madness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), p.2.

⁴⁰ Listener, 15 Feb. 1951, 272.

⁴¹ Scrutiny, June 1935, 84; Storey p. 384.

⁴² Times Literary Supplement, 8 Dec. 1950, 782.

⁴³ Times Literary Supplement, 21 Feb. 1935, 97; Storey p. 382.

is getting paler and paler."⁴⁴ For John the value of the edition was that it showed up the superiority of the asylum verse, while for Speirs it did just the opposite.⁴⁵ And so it goes on. Louis MacNeice finds Clare "at the mercy of his scanty reading",⁴⁶ and is countered by Robinson and Summerfield's justifiable contention that "Clare was very well read."⁴⁷ One critic can accuse him of scanty revision of his work; at the same time we find evidence of his meticulousness.⁴⁸ One finds few poems suited to quotation; another knows not where to stop.⁴⁹ One can detect two Clares, while another can see three.⁵⁰ One thinks his version of the nightingale's song is splendidly accurate, while another considers it will "perplex, if not confound, the fondest lover of Philomela."⁵¹ One criticises Unwin's study of peasant poets for being too broad in scope, while Kenneth Hopkins argues

⁴⁴ New Statesman and Nation, 9, 1935, 333-4.

⁴⁵ Cf. note 44 and note 41.

⁴⁶ London Magazine, Aug. 1956, 59-62.

⁴⁷ Robinson and Summerfield, ed. cit. (note 26), pp. 19-20.

⁴⁸ Cf. H.E. Bates, Mercury, May 1935, 73-4 and Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 187.

⁴⁹ Cf. Percy Lubbock, Nation and Athenaeum, 6 Sept. 1924, 694 (Storey p. 370) and Robinson and Summerfield, ed. cit. (note 26), p. 33.

⁵⁰ Cf. W.K. Richmond, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 158-62 (Storey p. 391); Naomi Lewis, New Statesman and Nation, 14 July 1951, 46 (rpt. N. Lewis, A Visit to Mrs Wilcox, London: Cresset Press, 1957, p. 64); and Alan Porter, Spectator, 23 Aug. 1924, 260-1 (Storey pp. 364-6).

⁵¹ Cf. T.P. Harrison, Birds in the Poetry of John Clare (Peterborough Museum Society, 1957), p.8 and B.J. Whiting, "Clare and the Nightingale" in Saturday Review of Literature, 5 Oct. 1935, 11.

for the inclusion of sundry others, at the expense of the likes of Clare, who "is now the subject of almost a library of criticism."⁵² I think I may be justified in concluding that Clare critics have been at cross-purposes.

One or two areas of dispute, although confusing, may at the same time be quite instructive. Consider, for instance, the question of Clare's "literary bearings". Ian Gregor has described Clare as "a quintessential romantic poet" because of his "reluctance to accept life on its own terms",⁵³ and yet Clare has never been quite happy in this role. Kenneth Richmond thought of him as having been forced by circumstances into Romanticism, in spite of being constitutionally unfitted for it.⁵⁴ Robert Shaw detects a similar transition, though without the suggestion of Clare's reluctance: "Beginning as an Augustan pasticheur, maturing as a classicist — of a peculiarly original turn but still a classical one, Clare's final art was Romantic."⁵⁵ These three critics may understand the term "Romanticism" a little differently, but they are more or less agreed that Clare fits into it. A larger number of critics, however, have discussed Clare as a consistently eighteenth-century writer. John Barrell's recent study of Clare accepts this approach:

⁵² Cf. Listener, 16 Dec. 1954, 1087 and Time and Tide, 21 Aug. 1954, 1112.

⁵³ Ian Gregor, "The Last Augustan" in Dublin Review, 229 (first quarter), 1955, 48.

⁵⁴ W.K. Richmond, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 158-62.

⁵⁵ Northamptonshire Past and Present, iii, 1964, 201-2; Storey p. 439.

"Donald Davie is certainly right when he says ...that Clare is not to be read primarily as a Romantic poet, but as writing 'in a tradition stemming from Thomson through Bloomfield, as competing therefore for the neo-classical laurels of "English Theocritus"...',⁵⁶ and Robinson and Summerfield have neatly summed up Clare's descriptive verse in the comment: "The Augustans had a place for it and Clare had a taste for it."⁵⁷ But the argument does not stop there. H.J. Massingham concluded that Clare's moralizing tendencies are manifested "not in the manner of his contemporaries, nor of the eighteenth century, but, surprising as it sounds, of the seventeenth."⁵⁸ And since Clare wrote many Elizabethan imitations, why not the sixteenth? This would enable his work to span five centuries, since Robert Lynd has obligingly written: "Clare, indeed, is more like a twentieth-century than an eighteenth-century poet."⁵⁹ I mention this controversy because it has a liberating effect on the assessment of Clare's work, enabling us to approach it without too many pre-conceived ideas about its historical station, though it may be as well to mention that my own study has convinced me of his enormous indebtedness to eighteenth-century ideas, if not so much to eighteenth-century forms.

⁵⁶ John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: an approach to the poetry of John Clare (Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 131.

⁵⁷ Robinson and Summerfield, ed. cit. (note 26), p. 31.

⁵⁸ Athenaeum, 7 Jan. 1921, 9; Storey p. 326.

⁵⁹ Nation, 22 Jan. 1921, 581-2; rpt. R. Lynd, Books and Authors (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1922), p. 98; Storey p. 341.

Another fruitful confusion concerns the efforts of critics to divide Clare's work into periods of development. One could point first of all to the varying opinion about the relative merits of Clare's four volumes. Most would agree that Poems Descriptive and The Village Minstrel are not his best efforts, but Ian Jack has had little support in his championing of The Shepherd's Calendar. Jack thought The Rural Muse an "anti-climax", but S.T. Hall, Dwight Durling, and Mrs Tibble have all preferred it. Dylan Thomas preferred the years 1832-37; while the more general preference for the later asylum works has already been mentioned.⁶⁰ A second divergence in this regard has been more subtle. In 1929 Edmund Blunden observed that a great part of Clare's verse "is a history of the transference of love in him from woman to Nature",⁶¹ but a recent doctoral thesis has confidently devoted its fourth chapter to "the transference of Clare's

⁶⁰ Cf. Ian Jack, op. cit. (note 25), p. 193; Ian Jack, English Literature, 1815-1832 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 130-1 and 136; S.T. Hall, Biographical Sketches of Remarkable People (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1873), pp. 155-70 (Storey p. 279); Dwight Durling, Georgic Tradition in English Poetry (Columbia University Press, 1935; rpt. Kennikat Press, 1964), p. 189; Anne Tibble, introduction to John Clare: Selected Poems (London: Dent, 1965), p. xiii; Dylan Thomas, Adelphi, 10, 1935, 181; Arthur Symons, introduction to Poems by John Clare (London: H. Frowde, 1908), p. 17 (Storey pp. 303-4); Hugh Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era (Cambridge University Press, 1910), pp. 241-5 (Storey pp. 310-11); and J.C. Squire, Books in General, series 3 (London: Secker, 1918), p. 132.

⁶¹ Edmund Blunden, Nature in English Literature (London: Woolf, 1929), p. 55; Storey p. 379.

love of nature to love of woman."⁶² If critics are quite happy to accept both as true, then this considerably lessens the effect of any such "transference", indeed of any marked division between "early" and "late" Clare. P.N. Furbank wrote in a review dated 1964 that "one doesn't notice any fundamental difference" between early and late Clare,⁶³ and was chastised in the correspondence columns of the Listener by Anne Tibble for expressing an opinion so "dreadfully obsolete."⁶⁴ One could find support for Mrs. Tibble's indignation in many articles which have stressed the different (superior) quality of the later work; of such support Middleton Murry is representative: "Nothing in Clare's pre-asylum poetry has prepared us for quite this kind of intensity."⁶⁵ There is just as much support, however, for Furbank's view, and not all of it is from unperceptive critics. John Speirs thought that "what is of value in Clare's work seems to develop singularly little",⁶⁶ and his point is expanded by Ian Jack. In Clare, Dr Jack suggests, "the contrast between good and bad is not that between early and late, or late and early... Some of the bad poems are early, some late. It was not a

⁶² L.J. Masson, "The Fearful Vision: the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 279A (Syracuse).

⁶³ Listener, 71, 1964, 965.

⁶⁴ Listener, 72, 1964, 53.

⁶⁵ J. Middleton Murry, "Clare Revisited" in Unprofessional Essays (London: Cape, 1956), p. 57.

⁶⁶ Scrutiny, June 1935, 84-6; Storey p. 385.

question of development, but of what Clare could and could not do."⁶⁷ A doctoral thesis on Clare by Mark Minor has divided his work into six periods, with a view to illustrating the poet's chronological development.⁶⁸ For the purposes of this dissertation, which will deal primarily with recurrent themes in Clare's poetry, I shall be regarding his work as a whole, placing early work alongside late without fear of discord, and stressing the consistency of his thought rather than its changefulness. This is not to say that Clare's work never improves beyond his first derivative warblings, nor that his asylum pieces are lacking in a distinctive "note of sadness" — I accept that his technical agility and his range of moods expand as much as in any other poet (though my own preference is for his middle years), but his preoccupations with nature, woman, the past, Eden, and poetry are evident from the start and with him to the finish.

With the foregoing summary of critical divergencies in mind I approach my study of Clare with some trepidation, but at the same time with some confidence that the gauntlet is worth running. The persistence of the "life and work" approach, coupled with polarized estimates of both, is not the only vexation. Errors of fact

⁶⁷ Ian Jack, op. cit. (note 25), p. 200.

⁶⁸ M.G. Minor, "The Poet in his Joy: a critical study of John Clare's poetical development," Dissertation Abstracts, 31 (1971), 4784A (Ohio State).

have been just as prevalent as uncertainties of judgement, and the Tibbles have been as severely reprimanded for inaccuracy as Frederick Martin was for distortion. One reviewer counted as many as thirty-eight "errors and improvements" in a single letter transcribed by the Tibbles in 1932, and the longer account of the journey from Essex was copied "with more than 450 errors of punctuation, spelling, misreading, omission and improvement."⁶⁹ Counter-defence has been followed by counter-attack. Geoffrey Grigson has been accused of sloppy editing, and even Robinson and Summerfield have erred on occasion.⁷⁰ This is not the place to survey the editorial history of Clare's manuscripts; I simply record the fact of its turbulence as another instance of the difficulty of getting at "the real Clare". The unavailability of certain manuscripts has been another obstacle to research, and the Tibbles have repeatedly appealed to American collectors to divulge their treasures. Large numbers of Clare's letters are still missing, as is the valuable folio of The Rural Muse, containing some 188 pages of poems.⁷¹ Until recently it was not even

⁶⁹ Times Literary Supplement, 25 May 1956, 313. Cf. TLS, 18 Oct. 1957, 625 and TLS, 17 Jan. 1958, 31.

⁷⁰ See Listener, 9 July 1964, 53; Listener, 20 Aug. 1964, 274; Times Literary Supplement, 11 June 1964, 516; TLS, 2 July 1964, 571; TLS, 10 Sept. 1964, 845; and Robinson and Summerfield, introduction to The Later Poems of John Clare (Manchester University Press, 1964), p. 1.

⁷¹ See Times Literary Supplement, 5 Dec. 1929, 1032; TLS, 5 Apr. 1947, 157; TLS, 7 Feb. 1948, 79; TLS, 20 April 1951, 245.

certain how many volumes of poetry Clare had published.⁷² The total number of Clare poems available in print in this century is, by my count, 1220: a figure comprising some 755 pre-asylum poems and 465 asylum poems. Many of these have appeared in dribs and drabs in a variety of periodicals and papers, frequently without a date being given. And yet Clare's total output must be something over 2,000 poems, and a definitive collection has been at least ten years in progress. Indeed, many would doubt the usefulness or competence of such a project in the first place. It was no very inspiring critic who wrote in 1956: "With few exceptions Clare so far has been unfortunate — very unfortunate — in the quality of his devotees and expositors."⁷³

In spite of this we do have a good deal of sensible statement about Clare in print, even if each contributor has made only a small number of valid points. By piecing together a collection of these partial insights, as Mark Storey has done, one can at least accumulate some coherent line of thought. In 1964 Robinson and Summerfield felt that Clare had been done less than justice in the hundred years of evaluation since his death. "Clare's work is due for reassessment. It is hoped that it will not much longer be overlooked."⁷⁴ Since 1964 a good

⁷² See Times Literary Supplement, 1 March 1974, 212.

⁷³ Listener, 10 May 1956, 607-8.

⁷⁴ Robinson and Summerfield, ed. cit. (note 70), dust jacket.

number of doctoral dissertations on Clare have been written in the United States, covering such topics as the effect of the environment on Clare's development, his georgic and pastoral background, the achievement of his sonnets, his courtships and visions, the Utopian aspects of his work, and the notions of "experience" and "relationship" considered as a critical context for examining his work. Each of these in turn has attempted to clear away some of the critical fog — as the most recent of them has complained: "A peasant with a knack for rhyming observations on linnets, rooks, and clover, a poet who never transcended his provincialism while sane but fortunately went mad in his later years and flowered briefly into Blake-like vision: this is the Clare of literary history's paragraph..."⁷⁵ In 1972 John Barrell's book The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840 discussed Clare's relationship to the prospect poets of the eighteenth century, his syntactical divergency from their techniques insofar as his sense of place was unique and personal, and the effects of enclosure on his vision of a local Eden. Despite the review which bewailed Barrell's failure to show "what poets and poems are, and how poets come to write,"⁷⁶ this has been the first book-length discussion of Clare's

⁷⁵ C.A. Russell, "Experience and Relationship: a context for the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1973), 6883A-6884A (Pennsylvania); microfilm p. xxvi.

⁷⁶ Times Literary Supplement, 9 June 1972, 654.

poetry to be published and is an important movement in the direction of fuller recognition. Barrell's approach, however, is a narrow one, and Mark Storey notes in 1973: "Nobody has given a coherent critical account of the poetry in all its detail and abundance."⁷⁷ At the best of times only a fragment of the complete picture has been set before us: Clare the botanist, Clare the peasant, Clare the visionary, the balladeer, the lunatic, the lover, and the poet. Some have naively presumed that he was just an unambitious village songster: "He did not seek for fame, only the simple joy of singing to woodland solitudes and the winds of autumn."⁷⁸ Well-intentioned though this sort of remark may be, it has deviated a considerable distance from Clare's own estimate of himself. Clare thought George Darley would be "one among the many that shall be elected as true Poets of the 19th century", and went on to add: "I assure you I will do my best yet if I live to make one of the number with ye..."⁷⁹ To attempt to give every aspect of Clare's work its due would be an extremely ambitious task, yet it should at least be possible by now to take his claims to a full study for granted, even if his posthumous reputation has been slow of growth. Mrs. Tibble wrote in 1964: "Give Clare a little more of the 'slow time' he believed brought justice, and he will take his place,

⁷⁷ Mark Storey, op. cit. (note 31), p.1.

⁷⁸ Times Literary Supplement, 23 Sept. 1949, 618.

⁷⁹ Clare to Darley, 3 Sept. 1827, in Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 202.

without insinuations of over-praise, beside Blake and Coleridge. Give him 200 years more of 'enduring time', and he may be seen, as Edmund Blunden said a week or two ago, as the Chaucer of the early nineteenth century."⁸⁰

In this thesis I hope to be able to amalgamate a large number of partial insights into Clare's work, and as a unifying thread I offer Clare's phrase "a relish for eternity". Such is the intensity of his feeling for the local landscape, for the teeming wildlife which inhabits the land and the air, for womankind as experienced as an integral part of natural harmony, for the past which represents the natural world in its undisturbed perfection, and finally for poetry itself as a means of giving expression to this harmonious vision, that all these things assume a religious importance in Clare's experience. He shares Wordsworth's anxiety to eternize "spots of time". Unless there are parts of Man's experience which can aspire to some permanent significance, some "lasting home", then the whole of life is in danger of being meaningless. Clare's longing for eternity, felt as a reaction against the transience of both Nature's beauty and women's affections, and against the fickleness of literary fame, expresses itself in a habit of investing all the preoccupations of his life with religious meaning. Intense observation of the natural world becomes a prerequisite of the poet's own contact with Nature's deeper language. The past, childhood, and solitude assume a sanctified importance. Nature becomes the

⁸⁰ Listener, 9 July 1964, 53.

mouthpiece of God, sustaining the poet in need and whispering of eternity. Woman becomes a goddess, and as such an incidental means of access to God. Poetry itself becomes a re-enactment of God's own words of creation. All the vital concerns of the poet's life are tinged with the divine. These concerns have all been discussed or noted before, but largely in isolation and without regard to a composite vision.

How far this habit of divinization in Clare's poetry is a conscious process is difficult to determine, but to do justice to its consistency requires an ordered approach. I have chosen to discuss Clare's major preoccupations in the order which is most meaningful to me, without wishing to impose on Clare a structure of which he was unaware. I do not use the word "process" in the sense that Clare started by divinizing the past, then went on to nature, then woman, and so on; it is rather a process in the sense of an accumulation of significance attached to each aspect of Clare's experience, and each aspect may well have been prominent in his thinking at the same time. There is an ascending scale of importance which may be attached to any one of life's concerns, culminating in a divine mystique, and in each of the major preoccupations of his life Clare has climbed this scale with consistent relish. On the way up he has taught much to those of us who climb behind.

ABBREVIATIONS OF TEXTUAL SOURCES

The following abbreviations used in this thesis are in order of priority of the editions to which they refer:

- LPJC The Later Poems of John Clare. Ed. E. Robinson and G. Summerfield. Manchester University Press, 1964.
The texts of Clare's later poems given in this volume have been preferred to those of all other editions.
- CSPP Clare: Selected Poems and Prose (New Oxford English Series). Ed. E. Robinson and G. Summerfield. Oxford University Press, 1966.
The text of any pre-asylum poem, or any asylum poem not in LPJC, printed in this selection has been preferred to any version of it published elsewhere. (Cf. SPP below.)
- SPP Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare. Ed. E. Robinson and G. Summerfield. Oxford University Press, 1967.
The majority of poems in this edition are reprinted from CSPP, but since CSPP was a milestone in Clare studies, establishing the definitive text of a generous selection of poems, I have consistently referred to it instead of the more recent SPP. CSPP is also preferred for being more readily available (in paperback) and for giving line numbers in its margins (though SPP has the advantage of an index of first lines). SPP has been cited for any of the 25 poems which it adds to the stock of CSPP.
- SC The Shepherd's Calendar. Ed. E. Robinson and G. Summerfield. Oxford University Press, 1964.
This is the definitive text of Clare's longest poem; punctuated versions may be found in JCSP and PJC (below). SC is also available in paperback (1973).
- JCSP John Clare: Selected Poems (Everyman's Library).
Ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble. London: Dent;
New York: Dutton, 1965.
Texts contained in this edition, but not available in any of the four above, have been cited in preference to those in the two below, even though it is substantially an unemended selection from PJC.

This edition is more readily available (in paperback) than PJC (now out of print in the Commonwealth), and it corrects a few of the latter's errors (see JCSP, p. 345). Also in this selection are some twenty-one asylum poems not previously published, and one previously printed only in part.

- PJCM Poems of John Clare's Madness. Ed. Geoffrey
Grigson. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul,
1949.
- This contains fairly unreliable readings of ex-
clusively later poems (i.e. post - 1840). Many of
the poems in this edition are now available in
LPJC, CSPP, or JCSP, but it contains some 25 poems
not in these three, its texts of which I have ranked
ahead of those in PJC (only on chronological grounds)
plus 74 poems and fragments not to be found else-
where (except for a few in selections or anthologies
which reprint the Grigson text). For these 74
poems this is still a very valuable edition.
- PJC The Poems of John Clare. Ed. J.W. Tibble. 2 vols.
London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1935.
- All texts of poems not in any of the above editions
(still a very large number) have been taken from
this major two-volume edition.

Other textual sources have been used from time to time for poems not contained in any of the above editions, and these have been cited in footnotes as they occur. On the text of "The Parish" see footnote 15 in chapter 3, p. 74 below. For a full list of editions see Bibliography part I, Section A.

Editions of Clare's letters and prose have been cited in full in the first relevant footnote in any chapter; thereafter an abbreviated form has been used. I have also abbreviated Mark Storey's collection of material on Clare in the Critical Heritage Series — see footnote 1 in Introduction above.

CHAPTER ONE: THE POET'S EYE

"Every trifle will his eye detain" (SC,111)

One of the most useful, and for that reason most over-worked, words in critical currency is the word "vision". It seems that some poets have it and others do not, but attempts to define this faculty inevitably perish in the ineffable. If there is general approval of the assumption that poets should transcend their surroundings in order to penetrate the veils of illusion which enshroud the so-called "real world", there is nevertheless a certain disparagement associated with the word "visionary". Poets have had some difficulty in keeping their feet on the ground while their heads are in the clouds. Indeed, one of the peculiarities of the word "vision" is that it can carry two quite contrary meanings, which the Shorter Oxford Dictionary records as follows: (sense 2) "The action or fact of seeing or contemplating something not actually present to the eye..."; (sense 3) "The action of seeing with the bodily eye, the exercise of the ordinary faculty of sight, or the faculty itself." It may seem strange that a single word has been made to signify both mystical insight and mundane eyesight, yet we are accustomed by our readings of Romantic poetry in particular to look for sermons in stones without devaluing the stones themselves. Take away the trees, and we take

away the "spirit" which resides in them. John Clare has had the "visionary" label fastened on to him often enough, with the recommendation that he be shelved alongside Wordsworth and Blake, and yet there has been very little attempt to relate his delight in physical perception to the workings of his "visionary gleam". I have suggested in my introduction that Clare is constantly translating experience into symbols of eternity, bodily vision into "something not actually present", and so the logical place to begin is with the poet's eye.

John Barrell's recently published book on Clare, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840, has devoted much of its length to a comparison between Clare's descriptive viewpoint and that of characteristic passages (modelled on the landscapes of Claude and Poussin) of Thomson and Cowper.¹ It is not difficult to see why such a study should have been attempted: Dwight Durling, after plodding systematically through virtually every descriptive poem written in the eighteenth century, arrives at Clare with a distinct sense of déjà vu, and uses him as evidence of an increasing "breaking up of the elements of the descriptive poem into shorter forms."² To a greater or lesser extent, Clare has availed himself of the elements of genre sketches, natural history,

¹ John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: an approach to the poetry of John Clare (Cambridge University Press, 1972), chapters 1 and 3.

² Dwight Durling, Georgic Tradition in English Poetry (Columbia University Press, 1935; rpt. Kennikat Press, 1964), p. 187.

picturesque description, tragic narrative, moral and religious reflection, social criticism, humanitarianism, domesticity, panegyric, physico-theology, retirement, and all the other merchandise that makes up the Virgilian stock-in-trade, and yet his method has been to take over the preoccupations of the georgic tradition into more easily manageable fragments. In so doing he has largely discarded the structural unity of the large-scale descriptive poem, a unity which depends on the elevated position of the poet who stands as master of all he surveys, casting his eye over the landscape's horizontal bands, meditating on moors and mountains, manners and morals, drawing all things in to his synthesising perspective. Consequently Barrell's prolonged comparison between Clare and the Thomsonians eventually brings the realisation that they have very little in common, and Barrell is obliged to acknowledge that "insofar as Clare was successful in expressing his own sense of place, he was writing himself out of the main stream of European literature."³ Barrell has had a long way to come for such a slight conclusion.

There is, however, something to be said for coming at Clare's poetry through the landscape tradition, in that his divergence from it is a pointer to his preference for a more particularized mode of description, and I would argue that particularity is the first step towards the divinizing vision — the nearer the eyesight the clearer the insight; or, as Patricia Ball has said in

³ Barrell, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

paraphrasing Ruskin: "A steady and honest beholding of the object is compatible with, and crucial to, any deeper understanding of it in terms of its human relevance, the moral and emotional value of what is seen."⁴ It would be wrong to suggest that Clare owes nothing at all to the prospect poets — the word "prospect" itself is used not infrequently by Clare, along with "landscape", "scene", "view", and "horizon":

The landskip's stretching view, that opens wide...
(PJC, I, 116)

A distant prospect cheer'd my eye...
To make the landscape round complete. (PJC, I, 164)

A landscape to the aching sight,
A vast expanse of dazzling light. (PJCM, 151)

The fact that this kind of perspective is represented by no more than fifty poems is doubtless attributable to the remarkable flatness of the Northamptonshire countryside, though at the same time Clare was probably wary of the staleness of the "ascend an eminence" technique. In 1788 the Gentleman's Magazine complained that readers "have been used to see the Muses labouring up ...many hills since Cooper's and Grongar, and some gentle Bard reclining on almost every mole-hill."⁵ And the mole-hill was about as high as Clare was able to get:

Upon a molehill oft he dropt him down,
To take a prospect of the circling scene. (JCSP, 31)

And on this mole-hill where I stand
To look, 'tis luscious to behold. (PJC, II, 238)

Occasionally he may find "rising ground" (PJC, I, 347;

⁴ Patricia M. Ball, The Science of Aspects (London: Athlone Press, 1971), p.70.

⁵ Gentleman's Magazine, lviii, 1788, 151.

CSPP,135), or a "pleasant swell" (CSPP, 184), or even a "bank" (PJC,I,267), but his encounters with genuine eminences are very rare. He uses the word "eminence" itself in "The Last of Autumn" (PJC,I,356), though judging from a passage in his autobiography he does not imply much height by the word: "I dropt down on the thymy molehill or mossy eminence to survey the summer landscape..."⁶ In his early "Narrative Verses" Clare recounts a climb up Barnack Hill, from the summit of which he gazes over villages, cottages, and spires...

When tir'd with such far-stretching views
I left the green hill's sideling slope... (PJC,I,34)

The climb has been worthwhile, but too much of the giddy heights is tiring to his eyes. Clare is more at home at ground level, and it is significant that when he comes to sing the praises of church steeples, he seems to be looking up rather than down ("Boston Church", PJC,II,112-13; "Glinton Spire", PJC,II,113). Whatever Clare takes from the prospect poets he adapts to his own locale and his own aesthetic preferences; in this he is far removed from Thomson, whose high viewpoint is designed, according to Barrell, to create "a space between the landscape and the observer, similar in its effect to the space between a picture and whoever is looking at it."⁷ Clare desires no such space.

⁶ J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Prose of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 25.

⁷ Barrell, op. cit., p. 21. Page numbers for the following six references to Barrell have been cited in brackets within the text.

Barrell goes on to characterize Clare's divergence from the eighteenth-century "idea of landscape" as a highly personal "sense of place", and it is this sense which accounts for Clare's abandoning the traditional linear apprehension of a scene and his emphasis on a circular view. It is certainly true to say that insofar as Clare avails himself of an elevated viewpoint his perception gives the impression of being an excited and rapid roaming-at-large rather than a carefully structured progression:

... sweeping with the eye
 In easy circles, wander where we will! (PJC,I,280)
 And the orison [horizon] throws away its shroud
 And sweeps its stretching circle from the eye
(SC,119)

What is far more important, however, is what Clare does with his eye once he has made this initial reconnaissance, and it is with this question in mind that Barrell adduces the evidence of Clare's syntax to show that his purpose "is not so much to describe a landscape, or even to describe each place, as to suggest what it is like to be in each place." (P.166). This being the case, we can expect to find a considerable variety of focus as Clare's eye flits from object to object, accumulating all the manifold impressions that go to make up the experience of any scene. Thomson himself occasionally makes a sudden shift from distance to close-up: having ranged over hill and vale till his eye discerns distant mountains and seas, he suddenly returns to the flowers at his feet:

But why so far excursive? when at hand,
 Along these blushing borders bright with dew,
 And in yon mingled wilderness of flowers,
 Fair-handed Spring unbosoms every grace.
(Seasons,I,526-29)

Barrell finds this kind of re-focusing quite frequently in Cowper, where it seems to indicate a "confusion between a generalising structure, which unifies the landscape, and an interest in the picturesque details of its individual features." (P.57). By the time we get to Clare, the rapid alternation of near and distant images has become standard practice, and his habit of ranging back and forth to accumulate sense impressions of a scene is a remarkably consistent one.

All these, with hundreds more, far off and near,
Approach my sight... (PJC, I, 116)

The eye each moment, as it gazes o'er,
Still loses objects which it mark'd before;
(PJC, I, 209)

Now, view the prospect where we will,
On woods above or vales below,
Or high or distant, winter still
Stretches his dazzling scene of snow.
(PJC, I, 359)

I viewed the trees and bushes near,
And distance till it grew to grey. (PJC, II, 261)

One could multiply examples, but even here a certain dilemma is apparent, a dilemma which Barrell defines as "the sense of particularity" versus "the sense of multiplicity". (Pp. 152-3). How is the poet to make us aware of all the "hundreds" of objects which claim his eye, while still managing to represent each one in all its individuality? This is really the vital question in Barrell's discussion, and his answer to it is two-fold. The first merit Clare evinces is that of economy: "Cowper's way of revealing the particularity of a thing is to heap it with details ... Clare's way is to fix the object with one or two striking images." (P.151). His second virtue is an idiosyncratic syntax, which enables

him to reveal images "as parts not so much of a continuum of successive impressions as of one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions." (P.157). Barrell goes on to construct an eloquent defence of Clare's sense of form, arguing that his use of a manifold rather than a continuum of impressions generates a feeling of spontaneity and facilitates a fusion of particularity and multiplicity. At the height of his powers Clare is able to take in the whole landscape with one coup d'oeil, but after the move to Northborough had disoriented his sensibilities we find him reverting from hypotaxis to parataxis. Finally, says Barrell, during the asylum years a complete dislocation invades Clare's poems, "few if any of which attempt, understandably enough, to evoke or to describe places or landscape." (P. 180).

I have no intention of discrediting Barrell's analysis of Clare's poetic structure, but it seems to me that his approach is desperately narrow. Any account of Clare's technical talents or aesthetic leanings which leaves out the last twenty-five years of his work cannot aspire to comprehensiveness. Furthermore, the kind of structure which Barrell identifies is confined, by my estimate, to about thirty-five poems, which is a tiny fraction of Clare's output, however accomplished these pieces may be. But Barrell has not purported to offer anything other than "an approach" to Clare, and we are quite at liberty to open up other routes. Indeed, Russell Noyes in his Wordsworth and the Art of Landscape discerns five different kinds of landscape-description in Wordsworth, one of which, a "multifold" working of the imagination to capture the

spirit of the place,⁸ is akin to what Barrell claims for Clare. Another of Noyes's categories includes "scenes which are read as symbols-translucent of the moral and spiritual world",⁹ and while this does not necessitate any particular structure, it suggests a level of perception of which Barrell would seem to find no evidence in Clare. This matter of levels of perception in Clare's work, and the kinds of unity thereby established, is another of those areas of fruitful debate which I mentioned in my introduction. Radcliffe Squires sees the binding force of Clare's vision as "a law of joyful movement ... The perception of such a law gave his poetry a superb natural unity."¹⁰ A similar approach is made in a Times Literary Supplement review of the 1964 edition of The Shepherd's Calendar: "The brilliant pictures of sunshine and frost, of bird and animal and flower, of country scenes and attitudes — these are given unity and actuality by the imaginative power of the poet's personal emotion suffused over the whole composition. This emotion can only be called love, which includes delight, wonder, profound attachment, the desire to submerge personal identity in the object."¹¹ The trouble with these approaches, honest though they may be, is that they could equally well refer

⁸ Russell Noyes, Wordsworth and the Art of Landscape (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 210-18.

⁹ Noyes, op. cit., pp. 225-32.

¹⁰ Victorian Studies, March 1966, 291-2.

¹¹ Times Literary Supplement, 14 May 1964, 416.

to Thomson or Cowper:

Nor shall the muse disdain
To let the noisy little summer-race
Live in her lay and flutter through her song:
Not mean though simple — to the sun allied,
From him they draw their animating fire.

(Seasons, II, 236-40)

What is this if not "a law of joyful movement" or "imaginative power"?

More recently Tim Chilcott has taken Clare to task for the "structural haphazardness" of The Shepherd's Calendar,¹² the poem which Barrell considered to be "better than any other of Clare's long poems" in its communication of "the sense of the landscape as a manifold of simultaneous impressions..."¹³ Chilcott finds this poem lacking in any synthesising force, and asserts that while John Taylor may have exaggerated in calling it a "descriptive catalogue in rhyming prose", it is nonetheless weakened by a number of passages which are too "episodic", with no unifying centre but only "an accumulation of small sketches."¹⁴ However, Chilcott argues, there are also a few outstanding patches, characterised by an ability to transform direct observation into imaginative synthesis, in which Clare (with the expert guidance of Taylor) has succeeded in establishing a firm centre of tone, to which all incidental detail is subordinated. Chilcott gives few examples of this more sophisticated structure based on a "firm centre" or a "dominant image" (he concentrates on lines 311-26

¹² Tim Chilcott, A Publisher and his Circle (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 116.

¹³ Barrell, op. cit., p. 169.

¹⁴ Chilcott, op. cit., p. 117.

of "July" in The Shepherd's Calendar), but my own search for evidence has furnished some twenty outstanding poems of this sort, most of them from Clare's middle and late work. Some of these, like "Winter in the Fens" (PJC,II,298) and "The Meadow Lake" (PJC,II,300), have sustained this kind of structural unity for almost thirty lines: the central idea of "winter" in the former poem manages to draw together all the various manifestations of that season into a splendidly synthesised picture, while in the latter piece the poet's eye never deviates from the lake in front of him, while fish swim in it, rats rustle by it, cows wade through it, flies float on top of it, birds skim over it, and finally a shepherd's dog jumps into it. A shorter lyric may be worth quoting in full:

The Silver Mist

The silver mist more lowly swims
 And each green-bosomed valley dims,
 And o'er the neighbouring meadow lies
 Like half-seen visions by dim eyes.
 Green trees look grey, bright waters black,
 The lated crow has lost her track
 And flies by guess her journey home:
 She flops along and cannot see
 Her peaceful nest on oddling tree.
 The lark drops down and cannot meet
 The taller black-grown clumps of wheat.
 The mists that rise from heat of day
 Fade field and meadow all away. (PJC,II,419)

Admittedly Clare has strung together a series of images, yet the all-pervading mist seems to permeate every line, providing that "one only string" which Taylor so desired.¹⁵

¹⁵ John Taylor, sonnet "On Simplicity", quoted in Chilcott, op. cit., p. 88.

There is yet another kind of structure in Clare, and this has been hinted at by one or two reviewers. Lilian Haddakin writes: "When he is at his best poetically, Clare's characteristic mode of thinking is neither discursive nor sustained. His characteristic mode is apparent in flashes of insight."¹⁶ One wonders how occasional "flashes" can be described as a "characteristic mode", but behind this confusion there is a glimpse of truth. Naomi Lewis remarked ten years earlier that Clare's asylum work involves a "shift in focus" which results in "what we might now call the poetry of impressionism",¹⁷ and taken together these two comments anticipate the argument of Thomas Frosch in his article on "The Descriptive Style of John Clare."¹⁸ Frosch begins by making the same sort of judgments about the early work as Chilcott: "The Lark's Nest", for example, is simply a series of static pictures linked rather vaguely by a detached "I". The eye focuses on a succession of objects as if moving through a page. A later poem, however, like "Birds' Nests", is more concerned with motion and transience, involving the juxtaposition of apparently random details; all of which reflects "the poet's dialectical counterattack to the sense of loss." Frosch discerns in the asylum poetry a marked tendency

¹⁶ Modern Language Review, April 1966, 295-7.

¹⁷ New Statesman and Nation, 5 May 1956, 492-3; rpt. N. Lewis, A Visit to Mrs. Wilcox (London: Cresset Press, 1957), p. 58; Storey p. 421.

¹⁸ Thomas Frosch, "The Descriptive Style of John Clare" in Studies in Romanticism, 10, 1971, 137-49.

to regard fleeting rather than fixed objects, a change from spatial orientation to a temporal scheme, from mental abstraction to direct perception (and not vice versa as is commonly argued), from an encyclopaedic procedure (studied and calculated) to a version which is true only for a specific instant (registering the shock of confrontation).

"Manifold", "episodic", "firm centre", "impressionism" — how are we to reconcile these? Let us pause for a moment and read a stanza from a Clare poem:

Where the chaff whipping outwards lodges round
 the barn door
 And the dunghill cock struts with his hens in
 the rear
 And sings 'Cockadoodle' full twenty times oer
 And then claps his wings as he'd fly in the air
 And there's the old cross with its round about
 steps
 And the weathercock creaking quite round in the
 wind
 And there's the old hedge with its glossy red
 heps
 Where the green-linnets nest I have hurried
 to find — (LPJC, 192)

What we notice first of all is the symmetry: all those "And"s enclosed by two "Where"s — this must be one of those "episodic" (I would prefer the word "sequential") poems, where one static image is quickly supplanted by the next. And yet there is a feeling of simultaneousness, a sense of a multitude of objects all crowding the poet's eye at the same time: could it be "manifold", in spite of the parataxis? It is no great step from here to read the stanza as an impressionistic recording of fleeting things; and I would even suggest that the poem's title, "Childhood", provides the key to our discerning a firm imaginative centre, around which these impressions are grouped. My purpose in this is not merely mischievous:

I want to suggest that there is at least a partial overlap between these various theories, though certain poems are more naturally in accord with one pattern than with another. The point is, surely, that all these patterns are valid in various cases, and that Clare is not confined to any one of them — in fact, there are probably a few more than I have mentioned here. Any reader who embarks on a journey through Clare's complete poems will quickly find certain images and ideas recurring in an order which seems far from arbitrary; in other words, there is an association of ideas at work, so that by referring from one poem to another we can often see why Clare has introduced a certain image at a certain point. And let us not neglect the sonnets, which frequently exhibit a tidy form through an octave-sestet division. In a very early sonnet, "The Primrose" (PJC, I, 118), the first eight lines are given to the flower while the last six introduce the school-boy and shepherd who happen by and admire it. In "Winter Song" (PJC, I, 284) the octave contemplates the robin's song and the cheerful tidings customarily associated with it, but line 9 proclaims "The sad reverse! thy song's a solemn dirge." Or one may examine some even shorter pieces, as James Kirkup has done, and conclude that: "The one poet who reminds me of Clare is the great Japanese haiku master, Issa ... The compactness and concision of Issa, Buson, Basho, Kikaku, Kyorai and other great Japanese haiku poets is often found in Clare's descriptions, the best of which are terse and sparse, and, like haiku, illuminating in the directness of their

visionary shock."¹⁹ This comment has even greater significance when we consider that Kirkup is introducing a collection of poems not from the asylum period but written between 1821 and 1837.

Such is the range of Clare's poetic styles that to do justice to them all would require an entire thesis, so like Barrell, Chilcott, Frosch, Kirkup and others before me I shall inevitably have to generalize from time to time, though the aspect of Clare's vision I want to come back to now seems to me a very pervasive one. I am reluctant to use the phrase "ut pictura poesis", mainly because it conjures up the old Thomson-Claude comparisons which have little bearing on Clare, and yet Clare does use the poem-painting analogy quite frequently, without, I might add, slavishly adhering to any strict rules of composition. As early as 1823 the Rev. W. Allen remarked in a letter to Clare's patron Lord Radstock: "[Clare] places before us an entire scene, from which we may cut out as many little pictures as we choose."²⁰ Allen emphasises here that Clare's method is to break down the scene into finely particularized images, so that the total landscape emerges as a series of impressions — sometimes synthesised, as we have seen, by a dominant image or by hypotactic syntax, sometimes allowed to stand simply as impressions, whether by "structural haphazardness" or by conscious craft. I

¹⁹ James Kirkup, introduction to Anne Tibble, ed., Birds Nest: Poems by John Clare (Ashington: Mid Northumberland Arts Group, 1973), p.12.

²⁰ Rev. W. Allen, Four Letters from Rev. W. Allen to Lord Radstock, on the Poems of John Clare... (1823) in Storey, op. cit., p. 177.

want to avoid quoting passages of Clare's poetry or prose which seem to recur in almost every discussion of his work, so I simply note in passing that the major point of his Essay on Landscape, his objection to Keats, and his letters to artists Hilton and De Wint, is that Nature must be depicted from first-hand experience. It is this premise which provokes his scorn both of high-romantic gothicism and of neo-classical nymphery: "So much for fancy pictures & their unnatural extras."²¹ The artist's job, according to Clare, is not to embellish or distort, but to represent faithfully the tiniest marks on every leaf and petal.

Ian Jack has remarked on the application of this "pictorial" vision to Clare's poetry: "He had the psychology of a painter, and one notices how often he uses painter-like language in talking of poetry. He once decided to write a hundred sonnets 'as a set of pictures on the scenes ... that appear in the different seasons.'"²² There are other examples of this "psychology" worth quoting, for they point to a consistent desire to capture fleeting moments for eternity. On seeing clouds lit up by a sunset the poet tells us:

I gazed upon them with a wishing eye,
And longed but vaguely for the painter's power
To give existence to the mingling dye
And snatch a beauty from an evening hour.
(PJC, I, 74)

²¹ Prose (Tibbles, 1951; see note 6), p. 214.

²² Ian Jack, English Literature, 1815-1832 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 133.

Beholding another "wild sunset" some twenty-five years later he thinks of the ~~sub~~limity of the scene as being

Like the rich thinkings of a master mind
Or dashes on the canvass none can find
In works inferior... (LPJC,110)

Elsewhere the poet walks out to "catch at little pictures passing bye" (SPP,81) or to record the "gentlest pictures of the infant day" (CSPP,175); from his confinement in the asylum he observes that "every eye admires/The lovely pictures that the spring brings out" (LPJC,214). In praising the poetry of Cowper, Clare imagines to himself "the very scenes/He painted in his words..." (LPJC,127), while the word "painted" as an adjective occurs in Clare's poetry (by my count) more than twenty times. I shall be discussing Clare's taste for the picturesque in chapter 3, but I would just mention its relevance here:

...These are the picturesque of taste to me
While painting winds to make compleat the scene
In rich confusion mingles every green
Waving the sketchy pencil in their hands
Shading the living scenes to fairy lands
(SPP,160)

It is also significant that on those few occasions when Clare despaired of giving artistic expression to his feelings he should make his lament in these terms:

Yet paint itself with living nature fails
—The sunshine threading through these broken rails
In mellow shades — no pencil eer conveys
And mind alone feels fancies and pourtrays
(CSPP,155)

Concurrent with this desire of Clare's to eternize particular images or pictures captured by the eye is his tendency to heap image on image with a "catalogue" effect. Dwight Durling's survey of eighteenth-century georgic poetry has made this mode a very familiar one to us, so

that we are apt to think of those endless lines of botanic detail that flowed from the pens of John Scott, Erasmus Darwin, John Evans, and William Cooper Taylor, and to recall Durling's succinctly damning remark: "Taylor seems to think that catalogues of country appearances are in themselves poetic."²³ Clare has not escaped this kind of censure, and even his warmest admirers, like Cecil Day Lewis, have been forced to acknowledge the tiresomeness of this technique: "[Clare's] longer poems ... tend to monotony and repetitiveness: sometimes they read like versified catalogues or nature-notes, so that the poem, instead of coming to a resolution, merely comes to a stop..."²⁴ Certainly Clare need have looked no further than Thomson to learn this technique (e.g. Seasons, I, 530-55), but I am inclined to agree with Arthur Symons when he writes: "[Clare] does not make pictures which would imply aloofness and selection; he enumerates, which means a friendly knowledge. It is enough for him, enough for his success in his own kind of poetry, to say them over, saying, 'Such they were, and I loved them because I had always seen them so.'"²⁵ One could cite at least fifty poems, taken from all stages of Clare's output, where he has simply strung together a list of trees, birds, nests, or flowers (which can so conveniently be incorporated into

²³ Durling, op. cit. (note 2), p. 176.

²⁴ C. Day Lewis, The Lyric Impulse (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 114.

²⁵ Arthur Symons, introduction to Poems by John Clare (London: H. Frowde, 1908), p. 19; Storey pp. 304-5.

a "nosegay"); indeed, he is quite conscious of this procedure, and quite prepared to defend it:

My wild field catalogue of flowers
Grows in my ryhmes [sic] as thick as showers
Tedious and long as they may be
To some, they never weary me (SC,53)

In one glorious passage in "The Village Doctress" Clare names, in the space of three stanzas, some thirteen herbs which the doctress has at her disposal, then mischievously concludes:

And more she sought whose fames I must forgo
Or my unlettered rhymes will bulky herbals grow.
(PJC,II,46)

I suspect that it is this same impulse to capture everything within his field of vision or knowledge that lies behind those sixty or more girls' names which run through the lines of the asylum poems. As early as 1821 Clare had written in his autobiographical sketches: "But other Marys, &c., excited my admiration, and the first creator of my warm passions was lost in a perplexed multitude of names, that would fill a volume to calendar them down..."²⁶ Over and over again, in his later years, Clare recalls one of those names and places it within the context of a catalogue of womanly charms.

Her hair is of the auburn,
And her cheek is of the rose;
And my bonny Sarah Ann is
The sweetest flower that grows.
Her lips are like the cherry
And her skin is lily white;
Her tongue is ever merry;
Her smiles are all delight. (JCSP,326)

It is pointless to apologise for this kind of writing:

²⁶ Edmund Blunden, ed., Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), p.87.

we must accept the poet's desire for comprehensiveness as part of his overwhelming love of life and his need to give permanence to its evanescence. At times we may find that the only thing giving any kind of unity to his flurry of images is the poet's eye itself, an eye which is drawn to a multitude of living things in all their glorious randomness:

The blackbird startles from the homestead hedge
 Raindrops and leaves fall yellow as he springs
 Such images are natures sweetest pledge
 To me there's music in his rustling wings
 'Prink prink' he cries and loud the robin sings
 The small hawk like a shot drops from the sky
 Close to my feet for mice and creeping things
 Then swift as thought again he suthers bye
 And hides among the clouds from the pursuing eye
(LPJC, 60-1)

I do not mean by this that the poet's eye or "I" is always physically present within the actual poem — in fact, out of the 550 or so of Clare's poems which set out to describe a certain place, only about 300 contain the poet's presence in the pronouns "I" or "me", leaving some 250 "nature" poems in which the poet's presence is only implied, or in which the pronouns "we", "he", "one", or "you" are used. The phrase "the eye" occurs in only a handful of poems, and yet the reader is always aware of the eye's implicitness in a Clare poem, so that there is seldom a sense of distance between perceiver and perceived. If the poetry-painting analogy is in danger of obscuring this fact, then the other usual comparison between Nature and a book of many pages should be treated with even more caution. Shaftesbury's idea of the "Book of Nature" is familiar to us, as is its currency amongst Thomson and his followers (e.g. Seasons, III, 670-1), and Clare

would have known lines like Bloomfield's: "The fields his study, Nature was his book." (The Farmer's Boy, I, 32.) E.P. Hood would seem to have had Bloomfield's line in mind when he wrote of Clare in 1851: "The fields of Nature are not so much a study to which he retires, or an observatory which he mounts; they are rather a book which he reads, and, as he reads, turns down the page."²⁷ There is plenty of evidence of this in Clare's poetry, though some of the best examples would not have been known to Hood in 1851:

Green spots appear like doubling a book down
To find the place agen... (LPJC, 157)

The summer she is gone her book is shut
That did my idle leisure so engage
Her pictures were so many — some I put
On memory's scroll — Of some I turned the page
Adown for pleasures after heritage (28)

The second quotation links the two ideas of "book" and "pictures", so that we get the feeling of the poet's encountering page after page of fleeting images.

How many pages of sweet nature's book
Hath poesy doubled down as favoured things...
(PJC, II, 145)

Elsewhere Clare speaks of "Nature's varied book" (PJC, I, 367), of her "close-sealed volume" (PJC, I, 522), of her "rural chronicles" (PJC, II, 295). In "The Pleasures of Spring" he cleverly likens the buttercup to an "open book" whose petals (or pages) shut at night,²⁹ and in

²⁷ E.P. Hood, The Literature of Labour (London: Partridge, 1851), pp. 128-64; Storey p. 260.

²⁸ E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, "Unpublished Poems by John Clare" in Listener, 29 March 1962, 556-7.

²⁹ W.K. Richmond, appendix to Poetry and the People (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947), pp. 230-42; this line is on p. 235.

the sonnet "On Taste" his cleverness shows a punning turn:

...all is night
 To the gross clown — nature's unfolded book,
 As on he blunders, never strikes his eye;
 Pages of landscape, tree, and flower, and brook,
 Like bare blank leaves, he turns unheeded by.
 (PJC, I, 279)

The point of this Nature-book metaphor is not that it places the poet at a distance from the object of his gaze, like a reader detached from a volume, or a spectator admiring a painting — this aspect of the analogy is, as I have suggested (in agreement with Barrell), inappropriate to Clare. The point is rather that Nature crowds our senses with a great many impressions which are not normally ordered in any way, and that the experience of perceiving Nature is rather like being inside a book. Moreover, each varied image or page contains a "message" ("scripture truths", as I shall argue later), and this message is decipherable only by those who have learnt to "read" properly. Without anticipating my argument too much, I would suggest here that Clare's intense observation of natural phenomena is motivated by his desire to interpret Nature's book, and that unlike many of his eighteenth-century forebears he is no mere rhyming botanist. Clare's impulse to register the particularity of every object is urged less by scientific curiosity than by spiritual longing. This also accounts, I think, for his discarding of bookish learning while actually in the presence of Nature. Books can only get in the way of the Book. Cowper, Burns, and Wordsworth have all urged us to quit our books,³⁰ and Clare praised Charlotte Smith for actually

³⁰ See Cowper, The Task, VI, 85f.; Burns, "Epistle to John Lapraik", stanzas 9-13; Wordsworth, "The Tables

doing so: "She wrote more from what she had seen of nature than from what she had read of it."³¹ In "May Noon" (PJC,I,280), "Pastime in Summer" (PJC,I,365), and nine or ten other poems, Clare allows himself a book in Nature's presence, but in his most contemplative pieces a book is just a distraction:

When last I paid a visit here,
 The book I brought for leisure's way
 Was useless, for a volume dear
 In crowds of pictures round me lay;
 The woods, the heath, the distant field,
 In strips of green and russet dye,
 Did such delicious pleasure yield
 I shut and put the volume by;
 The book at home was sweet indeed,
 But there I felt I could not read. (PJC,II,261)

Not surprisingly, the shepherd depicted in one of Clare's sonnets as poring over some "ballads bought at neighbouring fair", as he sits within the grassy shelter of a hawthorn nook, is resented by the poet as "Seeming unconscious of the beauties there." (PJC,II,306.)

I have implied in all this that the poet's relationship with Nature is a very intimate one, and I shall be taking this up in my next chapter. For the moment I want to come back to Barrell's important point about Clare's sense of place, or rather his "sense of Helpston",³² since it is a very local and personal environment that is most conducive to the flourishing of this relationship. The trend away from panoramic vistas of unlocalised

Turned". Cowper's line "And learning wiser grows without his books" is adapted by Clare in a poem on "Spring": "And study wiser grows without her books." (PJCM,159).

³¹ Prose (Tibbles, 1951), p. 177.

³² Barrell, op. cit., p. 184.

prospects and towards detailed observation of minutiae has been noted by every historian of eighteenth-century poetry, and this latter mode has always been recognized as typical of Clare. The whole character of Clare's writings is established by the dedicatory letter to his children prefixed to his autobiography of 1824, in which he remarks on the contrasting viewpoints of poets: "They do not all love to climb the Alps but many content themselves with wandering in the valleys — while some stand to gaze on the sun to watch the flight of the towering eagle — others not less delighted look down upon the meadow grass to follow the fluttering of the butterflye..."³³ Clare opts for the second latitude:

There lies a sultry lusciousness around
The far-stretched pomp of summer, which the eye
Views with a dazzled gaze — and gladly bounds
Its prospects to some pastoral spots that lie
Nestling among the hedge-confining grounds...
(PJC, II, 328)

In the poem "Wanderings in June" Clare follows a route across open plains till he enters an arbour of trees:

The eye, no longer left to range,
Is pent in narrowest bound,
Yet Nature's works, unnamed and strange,
My every step surround;
Things small as dust, of every dye,
That scarce the sight perceives,
Some clad with wings fly droning by,
Some climb the grass and leaves. (PJC, I, 345)

And again, a few years later:

When one's been walking in the open plain,
Where the sun ne'er winks his eye, 'tis sweet awhile
To meet the shadows of a narrow lane
Or quiet arbour of a woodland stile...
(PJC, II, 127)

³³ Prose (Tibbles, 1951), p. 11.

The kind of confinement Clare welcomes in these verses has nothing to do with the tyrannical confinement of enclosure; it is rather a delight in the opportunity to examine what Clare customarily refers to as the "meanest trifles" of Nature (e.g. PJC, I, 355), and this means getting down on one's hands and knees, parting the long grass, "searching with minutest gleg" (PJC, I, 43), "pausing o'er each tasty flower" (PJC, I, 191). In one of his asylum poems Clare extends his searching to the very cracks in the roadway:

Theres verdure in the stony street
 Decieving earnest eyes
 The bare rock has its blossom's sweet
 The micriscope espies
 Flowers leaves and foliage everywhere
 That cloaths the animated year (LPJC, 106)

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance for Clare of this microscopic exactitude, and one could cite hundreds of lines where Clare has captured the precise colouring, movement, or sound of a natural phenomenon. What could be more evocative than the following prose-poem, written in a sudden burst of asylum creativity?

Pleasant Sounds

The rustling of leaves under the feet in woods
 and under hedges;
 The crumping of cat-ice and snow down wood-rides,
 narrow lanes, and every street causeway;
 Rustling through a wood or rather rushing, while
 the wind halloos in the oak-top like thunder;
 The rustle of birds' wings startled from their nests
 or flying unseen into the bushes;
 The whizzing of larger birds overhead in a wood,
 such as crows, puddocks, buzzards;
 The trample of robins and woodlarks on the brown
 leaves, and the patter of squirrels on the
 green moss;
 The fall of an acorn on the ground, the pattering of
 nuts on the hazel branches as they fall from
 ripeness;
 The flirt of the groundlark's wing from the stubbles
 —how sweet such pictures on dewy mornings, when
 the dew flashes from its brown feathers!
 (PJC, II, 427)

Significantly, I think, the poet's eye is completely absent from this poem: we have come so far from the eighteenth-century prospect that the poet has become totally free from perspectival composition, totally involved with the place in which he stands. For one brief moment, as Clare writes elsewhere,

The place we occupy seems all the world. (PJC, II, 360)

In my next chapter I shall be continuing my exploration of Clare's "vision", with the purpose of defining the poet's relationship with the natural world. So far I have been concentrating on the eye's perspective, and I have tried to show that whatever structure we may want to discern in his verses, Clare's dominant impulse is to be right in the midst of the objects he describes — to make us feel the very tree-ness of trees, the bird-ness of birds. I have suggested also that this impulse is derived from a spiritual longing — a "relish for eternity" — and I shall be expanding this suggestion in subsequent chapters, in the hope of moderating some of that huge body of criticism which has decried the descriptive mode. Before moving on, I would recall my opening paragraph and stress again the interdependence of the two senses of the word "vision". By postulating ulterior motives in Clare's insistence on particularity, I would in no way diminish his love of trees and birds for their own sake; after all, as Basil Willey has reminded us, "Men cannot live by gleams alone."³⁴ If there is such a thing as a

³⁴ Basil Willey, The Eighteenth-Century Background (London: Chatto and Windus, 1950), p. 293.

"visionary gleam", there is also "the light of common day"; for Clare this entails no opposition, but rather an overflowing of love for the commonplace into love for the divine.

He loved the brook's soft sound
The swallow swimming by
He loved the daisy covered ground
The cloud bedappled sky
To him the dismal storm appeared
The very voice of God
And where the Evening rock was reared
Stood Moses with his rod
And every thing his eyes surveyed
The insects i' the brake
Where [Were] Creatures God almighty made
He loved them for his sake
A silent man in lifes affairs
A thinker from a Boy
A Peasant in his daily cares —
The Poet in his joy

(LPJC, 229)

CHAPTER TWO: THE POET'S SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP
WITH NATURE

"I could not walk the fields like common men
And have no fancys nourish" (LPJC, 146)

The tendency of my first chapter has been to remove Clare from the limitations of an eighteenth-century perspective and to characterize his divergence from that perspective as a loving attention to "trifles". A divergence from classicism, however, does not necessarily imply a propensity to romanticism, though so much depends on definitions that, as I have indicated in my introduction, Clare's work can find roots in any number of literary periods. Taking Robert Langbaum's view of romanticism in "Romanticism as a Modern Tradition"¹ as his point of departure, Charles A. Russell comes to the following conclusion in his dissertation on Clare:

The romanticist's strategy, as Langbaum has described it, involves the speaker's standing outside the scene before him, often viewing it from a distinctive perspective. He experiences everything he sees as his opposite. Everything has its own separate existence, and the simple act of looking itself comes to be regarded as creative. This way of perceiving stresses that everything seen is external to the speaker, and accentuates his detachment from the scene. In Clare's poetry, however, the images, the "subjects", are seen in such clear detail and with such understanding that

¹ Robert Langbaum, "Romanticism as a Modern Tradition" in The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Literary Tradition (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1957).

the poet and the reader seem to be in the scene themselves. The role of observer vis-à-vis the observed disappears, and perspective becomes an unworkable concept.²

In abandoning the concept of "experience", which is associated with that of perspective (be it classical or romantic), Russell is compelled to find some other means of assessing Clare's poetry. His solution is the notion of "relationship", which involves the poet's presence in the very midst of the scene he describes. With a much broader understanding of "structure" than many of those discussed in my previous chapter,³ Russell finds Clare's movement through the masses of detail in The Shepherd's Calendar to be orderly and consistent: "... while Clare's style is not climactic, neither is it anticlimactic. Each phrase provides an image, an apprehension that is immediate. The reader moves forward not because the syntax compels him ... but because of the meter, the rhythm, and the steady promise of discovery." (P. 143).

Owing to his failure to conform to conventional literary criteria, Clare emerges from Russell's study, just as he emerged from Barrell's, as something of a lone wayfarer, a "solitaire" (to use Clare's own word, JCSP, 41), cut off from the literary highway and pursuing a by-path

² C.A. Russell, "Experience and Relationship: a context for the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1973), 6883A-6884A (Pennsylvania); microfilm pp. 165-6.

³ Russell cites the criticism of J. Middleton Murry, John Clare and Other Studies (London: Peter Nevill, 1950); Rayner Unwin, The Rural Muse (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954); and Paul Schwaber, "Stays Against Confusion: the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 27 (1967), 1794A (Columbia).

of his own. Let us not forget that Clare's path crosses the thoroughfare at many points along the way, and that many of the criticisms levelled at descriptive poetry in general cannot be dismissed lightly as having no relevance to Clare, regardless of his accomplishment in that mode. At its simplest, the stricture against Clare's kind of poetry is summed up in that maxim of Thomas Gray which Wordsworth so disliked: "Description ... though an admirable ornament, ought never to be the subject of poetry."⁴ At its most complex, this interdict forms the basis of a major literary critique, that of Lessing's Laokoon published in 1766. For Lessing descriptive poetry was an invasion of the provinces of the other arts, especially painting. The poet should not try to mimic painting by describing a canvas, but should address himself to the "inner eye": "Paint ... the rapture which beauty produces, and you have painted beauty itself."⁵ The realm of painting is space, but the realm of poetry is time, so prolonged descriptions are admissible only if they introduce the element of action, and thus become "progressive pictures". Lessing's strictures proved influential in England. Edmund Burke had already condemned "naked description" as being of little merit, since it displays nothing of "a strong and lively feeling" in

⁴ Wordsworth to Richard Sharp, 16 April 1822, in E. de Selincourt, ed., The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1821-1830) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 65.

⁵ G.E. Lessing, Laokoon (1766), ch. xxi, in E. Bell, ed., Selected Prose Works of G.E. Lessing (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1913), pp. 124-5.

the describer.⁶ Coleridge added his weight to this argument in his Biographia Literaria: "Images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature ... become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion ... or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit."⁷ De Quincey is even more narrowly subjectivist: "The fact is that no mere description, however visual and picturesque, is in any instance poetic per se, or except in and through the passion which presides."⁸ The culmination of this attack is the Bowles-Byron controversy — Bowles protesting that no one can be a poet who has not an eye for nature, and Byron responding (in company with Campbell, Gilchrist, McDermot, Roscoe, and various anonymous critics) with satirical virtuosity.

Clare did not escape this assault, and in our own century the objection to descriptive poetry has lost none of its force. As we might expect, Thomas De Quincey, despite his affection for Clare, had strong reservations about the poet's work: "[Clare's] description is often

⁶ Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757; second edn. 1759; facsimile rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1971), part 5, section vii, pp.339-40.

⁷ S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (1817), ch. xv, in J. Shawcross, ed., Coleridge's Biographia Literaria (Oxford University Press, 1907), vol. II, p. 16.

⁸ T. De Quincey, "Notes to Lessing's Laokoon" (1826-27), section xi, in D. Masson, ed., Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey (London: A. and C. Black, 1890), vol. XI, p. 206.

true even to a botanical eye; and in that, perhaps, lies the chief defect; not properly in the scientific accuracy, but that, in searching after this too earnestly, the feeling is sometimes too much neglected."⁹ One need not look very far for modern versions of the same criticism:

The very precision of Clare's observations from Nature, and his fidelity to the record of his senses, is at once the delight and the weakness of his poetry.¹⁰

Clare has no hard core of individuality compelling his perceptions to serve an inner purpose. He has no inner purpose.¹¹

It was the misfortune of Clare that, with unsurpassed exactitude of vision and delicate skill in stating fact, he was devoid of all reflective power. ... Clare had no thoughts. He wandered through the country, storing up images and sounds, but he wove his reproductions of these upon no intellectual basis. His was a camera, not a mind ...¹²

It would be tedious to multiply examples, and foolhardy to assert that they have no weight. Once again, however, we may look for signs of critical uncertainty, and the remark about Clare's "camera" mentality may provide a clue. James Reeves has also likened Clare to a photographer, but for Reeves photography is no mere objective slavishness,

⁹ T. De Quincey, "Sketches of Life and Manners" in Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, Dec. 1840, 771-2; rpt. "London Reminiscences" in D. Masson, ed., Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey (London: A. and C. Black, 1890), vol. III, pp. 144-5; Storey p. 246.

¹⁰ R. Unwin, op. cit. (note 3), p. 122.

¹¹ John Speirs in Scrutiny, June 1935, 84-6; Storey p. 386.

¹² Edmund Gosse, "Nature in Poetry" in Sunday Times, 5 Oct. 1924, 8; rpt. E. Gosse, Silhouettes (London: Heinemann, 1925), pp. 107-8; Storey p. 375.

but rather a delicate art, "by virtue of the subtle exploitation of the possibilities of lighting and composition."¹³

H.E. Bates denies Clare a photographer's selectivity, but makes a virtue out of mirror-like fidelity:

By holding the glass perfectly still, with his peculiar intensity of faith and reverence, Clare could achieve a picture of such clear lyricism as no amount of pictorial juggling will ever achieve. The photographer moves and moves his camera until light and shade and position are perfect and then records the scene with impeccable faith; but Clare held up his mirror to the fields of summer and reflected a world complete not only with shade and sunlight but with sound and colour and fragrance and that special atmosphere of lyrical joy which was his own and which made the scene eternal.¹⁴

Robert Lynd agrees with the mirror analogy, but suggests the limitations of this vision: "[Clare's] poetry is a mirror of things rather than a window of the imagination."¹⁵

Horace Gregory casts around for another optical instrument and decides that Clare's world is "a world seen under a magnifying glass."¹⁶ It is salutary, at this point, to turn back to the Rev. W. Allen's comment on Clare in 1823: "He is the unshackled poet, who looks minutely into objects, without the aid of the optician."¹⁷

¹³ James Reeves, introduction to Selected Poems of John Clare (London: Heinemann, 1954), p. xiii.

¹⁴ Mercury, May 1935, 73-4.

¹⁵ Nation, 22 Jan. 1921, 581-2; rpt. Robert Lynd, Books and Authors (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1922), p. 95; Storey p. 340.

¹⁶ Horace Gregory, "On John Clare and the Sight of Nature in his Poetry" in The Shield of Achilles (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944), p. 28.

¹⁷ Rev. W. Allen, Four Letters from Rev. W. Allen to Lord Radstock, on the Poems of John Clare ... (1823) in Storey, op. cit., p. 180.

It is evident that what this jumble of analogies comes down to is simply this: either one can appreciate good description for its own sake, or else one cannot. It is no very startling conclusion, and it may offend those who would want to impose absolute judgments on art, but there is enough truth in it to take much of the sting out of the Bowles-Byron controversy. What appeals to one man as a mirror-image of life as it really is, offends the other as mindless objectivity. What impresses one as photographic selectivity, irritates another as "pictorial juggling". On the one hand, "Lessing's objections against the descriptive form seem to have permanent validity ...;"¹⁸ while on the other, if the descriptive style of a Thomson or a Cowper is condemned, "so should the theory be that condemns it."¹⁹ Clare, of course, was aware of the Bowles-Byron controversy, since his friend Octavius Gilchrist was one of Bowles's most vociferous antagonists, and his own reaction to it is understandable: "D--n such cant and canthers I hate it & the reading their contradiction & hubblebubbings give me the hiccup."²⁰ His response to Taylor's request (prompted by the principles of Lessing) that he include

¹⁸ Dwight Durling, Georgic Tradition in English Poetry (Columbia University Press, 1935; rpt. Kennikat Press, 1964), p. ix.

¹⁹ C.V. Deane, Aspects of Eighteenth Century Nature Poetry (Oxford: Blackwell, 1935), p. 91.

²⁰ Clare to Taylor, 21 June 1821, in D.B. Green, "New Letters of John Clare to Taylor and Hessey" in Studies in Philology, 64, 1967, 720-34.

more action in his poetry is no less ebullient: "I think many of the productions of the day that introduce action do it at the expense of nature for they are often like puppets pulled into motion by strings & there are so many plots semiplots and demiplots to make up a bookable matter for modern taste that its often a wonder how they can find readers to please at all."²¹

Many readers of Clare will applaud his rebuff to those who would have him abandon his descriptive style, though few would contend that his poetry is uniformly rewarding. Clare's reliance on the inventory technique creates weaknesses in his poetry which it would be culpably uncritical to overlook. He can be boring, repetitive, and even trivial. There are poems that make us feel that age has withered him and custom staled his infinite variety. But does this mean one's defence must rest on personal preference and kindly indulgence? If the critics are quite correct in lamenting the absence in Clare's poetry of "that concentrated and controlling energy of thought-feeling, which by its own authority and power appears to evoke the reserves and residues of sensational experience in the poet's soul and crystallise them about itself in a sustained harmony of utterance;"²² if there is no mind, no philosophy, no "vision" behind his

²¹ Clare to Taylor, 3 Jan. 1829, in J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Letters of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 222; Storey p. 213.

²² J. Middleton Murry, "Clare Revisited" in Unprofessional Essays (London: Cape, 1956), p. 77.

multifarious images; if he offers us only fact and no distillation of experience; then one's vindication of Clare is going to be severely strained. One could argue, with John Aikin in 1777, that the most fitting pursuit of poetry is "accurate and attentive observation, conducted upon somewhat of a scientific plan;"²³ or with John Ruskin in 1844 that the artist's first duty lies with the "loving study of nature as she is;"²⁴ or with Maurice Hewlett in 1924 that microscopic observation "induces emotion in the peasant-poet."²⁵ One could even seek some sort of apologia from Clare himself:

Trifles may illustrate great mysterys without derogating any thing from their grandeur — thus the oak need not be ashamed of the acorn as it is its parent — the lion of the little Jackall as it is his provider ... & trifles also explain great things the fall of an apple led Newton to the discovery of gravity — the shape of a simple leaf to an order in architecture & the shadow from a lamp on the wall to design and perspective .²⁶ little things lead to great discoverys.

I believe there is a reading of Clare which can set our

²³ John Aikin, An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry (1777; facsimile rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1970), p. 10.

²⁴ John Ruskin, Modern Painters, I, preface to second edn. (1844), para. 39, in E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds., The Works of John Ruskin (London: George Allen, 1903), vol. III, p. 44.

²⁵ Maurice Hewlett, Last Essays (London: Heinemann, 1924); Storey p. 358.

²⁶ Peterborough MS.7, p. 63; printed in Margaret Grainger, John Clare: Collector of Ballads (Peterborough Museum Society, 1964), p. 1.

estimate of his work on a surer foundation than that of sympathy with, or aversion to, the descriptive mode, and which can give proper weight to his fascination with "little things". I have given some intimations of such a reading in my introduction and at the end of chapter one, and the point I have tried to emphasise is that Clare's descriptive method is not used entirely for its own sake, but with a consistent awareness of the metaphysical significance of the physical. His poetry grows, as Grigson observes, "from learning and loving the material of nature, from vision, into meditated vision."²⁷ Clare is easily acquitted, as I have shown, from any charges of generalization, but I believe it has been the failure to recognize the real nature of his vision that has so persistently led to his arraignment on the grounds of over-particularity. It is no wonder that Russell shies away from any romantic approaches to Clare when he insists that "Morning Showers" (PJC, II, 299), for instance, is "a nature poem ... totally devoid of symbolic furniture ... [it] is simply a natural vision distinguished by its clarity of perception and presentation."²⁸ He is quite right — if the poem is read in isolation; but in the wider context of Clare's poetry that "natural vision" takes on another dimension. The nature of the romantic double-vision has been recognized by H.N. Fairchild:

²⁷ Geoffrey Grigson, introduction to Selected Poems of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), pp. 12-13; Storey p. 408.

²⁸ C.A. Russell, op. cit. (note 2), p. 111.

"The romanticist so persistently tries to find in trees the thrill of the unknown, and so persistently tries to give the unknown the tangibility of trees, that ... it seems not only easier but more fruitful to let descendentalism and transcendentalism run together in our minds than severely to keep them separate."²⁹ By regarding Clare's attention to "trifles" as a prerequisite of his receptivity to Nature's divine discourse, we can perhaps appease the disciples of Lessing and establish Clare as a poet who is not just a painter of pretty pictures, but who has something substantial to communicate. Bearing in mind Ruskin's discernment of the divine in Nature, I think his own manifesto might speak just as eloquently for Clare:

The whole function of the artist in the world is to be a seeing and feeling creature; to be an instrument of such tenderness and sensitiveness, that no shadow, no hue, no line, no instantaneous and evanescent expression of the visible things around him, nor any of the emotions which they are capable of conveying to the spirit which has been given him, shall either be left unrecorded, or fade from the book of record.³⁰

One particular emphasis which has been laid on Clare's work, in connexion with his love of all visible things, is potentially misleading and wants clarification at this point. I refer to the image of Clare the botanist, the ornithologist, the Gilbert White of Helpstone.

²⁹ H.N. Fairchild, The Romantic Quest (Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 143.

³⁰ John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice, III (1853), ch. ii, para. 10, in E.T Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds., The Works of John Ruskin (London: George Allen, 1904), vol. XI, p. 49.

Certainly there was a growing interest in the science of natural history throughout the eighteenth-century, an interest which was encouraged by the treatises of Thomas Pennant, John Aikin, and a host of others, and in poetry this is manifested in the versified manuals of Moses Browne, Richard Dodsley, John Laurence, Scott of Amwell, Erasmus Darwin — the list could include some fifty or sixty names. "Natural history," wrote Horace Walpole in 1770, "is in fashion."³¹ It was Wordsworth who declared that the poet "will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of Science;"³² and C.A. Moore remarks: "Probably a romanticist ought, for our convenience, to avoid all intercourse with the discoveries of the scientist; but in actual practice those poets whom we call romantic do not."³³ Clare, we know, had the works of naturalists Isaac Emmerton, Thomas Hogg, Elizabeth Kent, J. Macloc, Robert Mudie, Sir James Smith, and many others on his shelf,³⁴ and he makes reference to both Darwin and Ray

³¹ Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, 6 May 1770, in Mrs. Toynbee, ed., Letters of Horace Walpole (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), vol. VII, p. 379.

³² Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, second version (1802), in R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, eds., Lyrical Ballads (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 254.

³³ C.A. Moore, "The Return to Nature in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century" in Studies in Philology 1917, 243-91 (see especially pp. 284-6).

³⁴ See David Powell, "John Clare's Library" in The John Clare Collection in Northampton Public Library (Northampton Public Library, 1964), pp. 23-34; and Library World, May 1964, 362-3.

in his verses.³⁵ In 1930 George Druce identified 120 different plants referred to in Clare's poetry, and in 1955 James Fisher made a tally of 145 birds known to Clare.³⁶ We also know that Clare planned to write a "Natural History of Helpstone", and that he actually completed at least twenty-three natural history letters. His activities in this direction have been well documented by his biographers and editors and do not warrant repetition here, though they provide a most fascinating record of local birds, plants, and insects. Suffice it to say, in the words of James Fisher, that Clare is "the finest poet of British naturalists, and the finest naturalist of all British poets ..."³⁷

The corrective I am suggesting to this representation is simply that we bear in mind that Clare's interest in natural history is more "poetic" than "scientific". The difference may be easier to illustrate than to explain. One gets the feeling in reading Clare's numerous poems on birds and their nests that only when he goes beyond ornithological fact does he become interesting; his occasional failure to do so results merely in bathos:

³⁵ See J.W. and Anne Tibble, John Clare, A Life (second edn., London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 27.

³⁶ See T.P. Harrison, Birds in the Poetry of John Clare (Peterborough Museum Society, 1957), p. 6.

³⁷ James Fisher, "John Clare: Naturalist and Poet" in Listener, 19 Oct. 1961, 614-15.

The redcap is a painted bird
 And beautiful its feathers are;
 In early spring its voice is heard
 While searching thistles brown and bare;
 It makes a nest of mosses grey
 And lines it round with thistle-down;
 Five small pale spotted eggs they lay
 In places never far from town. (JCSP, 214)

Despite the last line, however, there are two words which momentarily rise above fact, insofar as an ornithologist would probably not use them: "painted" and "voice". It is this sort of word that endears the poet-naturalist to us, and Clare often makes use of unscientific terms:

Chaffinch carries the moss in his mouth (JCSP, 343)

The black house bee hath ceas'd to sing
 And white nos'd one wi' out a sting
 That boys will catch devoid of dread
 Are in their little holes abed (SC, 88-9)

At times Clare meets with flowers and birds he cannot identify, but their very mysteriousness seems to be an added attraction: he loves to lie amid "nameless flowers" (PJC, I, 218), or to linger where "strange birds sing / We have no name for" (LPJC, 157). Clare and the local woodmen call some Northamptonshire birds the "willow-biters" —

But what they are in learning's way
 Is all unknown to them or me. (PJC, II, 232)

In a letter to James Hessey he remarks of his poetic intentions: "I think vulgar names to the flowers best as I know no others."³⁸ Indeed the buttercup is a very rare exception:

In botany it claims an humble shrine
 & wears the name of "lesser celandine" (39)

³⁸ Clare to Hessey, Sept./Oct. 1820, in Letters (Tibble, 1951; see above, note 21), p. 67.

³⁹ W.K. Richmond, appendix to Poetry and the People (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947), pp. 230-42; this couplet is on p. 235.

Clare's attitude to botany is perhaps an ambivalent one. On the one hand he greatly admires the dedication and knowledge of the natural scientist:

The man of science in discovery's moods
 Roams oer the furze clad heaths leaf buried woods
 And by the simple brook in rapture finds
 Treasures that wake the laugh of vulgar hinds
(CSPP, 151)

On the other hand he is very resentful that the scientist must murder to dissect:

While he unconscious gibbets butterflies
 And strangles beetles all to make us wise
(CSPP, 151)

Capturing butterflies^f is "cruel sport" (PJC, I, 42); flower specimens should not be cropped but transplanted "root and all" (PJC, I, 249); botany is the pursuit of the "proudly wise" (JCSP, 195). The point is particularly well made in a passage from one of Clare's letters on natural history:

for my part I love to look on nature with a poetic feeling which magnifys the pleasure I love to see the nightingale in its hazel retreat & the cuckoo hiding in its solitudes of oaken foilage & not to examine their carcasses in glass cases yet naturalists & botanists seem to have no taste for this practical feeling they merely make collections of dryd specimens classing them after Linnaeus into tribes & familys & there they delight to show them as a sort of ambitious fame with them 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush' well everyone to his hobby⁴⁰

In reacting against "scientific cruelty" Clare is, of course, echoing the outbursts of a host of predecessors from Thomson onward, and humanitarianism has been noted as one of the major preoccupations of eighteenth-century

⁴⁰ J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Prose of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 174.

poetry.⁴¹ Apart from those cynegetics and halieutics which deliberately glorify blood sports, nearly every georgic poem has at least a passing protest to make about cruelty to animals. Beattie's Edwin may serve as representative:

His heart, from cruel sport estranged, would bleed
To work the woe of any living thing,
By trap, or net; by arrow, or by sling;
These he detested ... (The Minstrel, I, xviii)

Clare's disgust naturally extends to hunters, poachers, badger-baiters, and malicious hooligans, and is frequently vented in both poetry and prose; in fact, if all the mice, sparrows, pheasants, spiders, foxes, hares, bees, beetles, and snails that he so persuasively defends were to be spared the slaughterer's hand, Clare's cottage would quickly become a wild-life sanctuary.

I love the sparrows' ways to watch
Upon the cotters' sheds,
So here and there pull out the thatch,
That they may hide their heads.

And as the sweeping swallows stop
Their flights along the green,
Leave holes within the chimney-top
To paste their nest between. (JCSP, 60)

Even flies are rescued from the cobwebs (PJC, I, 79; PJC, I, 498) and worms spared from fish-hooks (SPP, 31) — though fishing itself is not condemned (JCSP, 137-8). Clare has been hailed as an ardent conservationist,⁴² and certainly he rails against "trampling clowns" who

⁴¹ See J. McPhee, "Humanitarianism in English Poetry from Thomson to Wordsworth" (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1963).

⁴² See Barbara Brill, "Conservation and the Poet" in Library Review, 22, Winter 1970, 412-15.

crush the dandelions (PJC,I,273), declares it "sinful" to pick wild flowers (PJC,II,486), and rebukes the boys who pillage the blackbird's nest (PJC,I,371). On the occasion of the threatened felling of the elm trees at the back of his cottage Clare had determined that "the first wretch that buried his axe in their roots should hang on their branches as a terror to the rest ... ;" but he goes on:

a second thought tells me I am a fool was
 People all to feel & think as I do the world
 could not be carried on — a green woud not
 be ploughd a tree or bush woud not be cut
 for firing or furniture & every thing they
 found when boys would remain in that state
 till they dyd [died] — this is my ⁴³
 indisposition & you will laugh at it

Such an "indisposition" is hardly suitable to a man of science, and as I suggested earlier, we need to be able to appreciate the precise relationship between Clare and Nature if we are going to understand his search for the eternal in the actual. Clare is the poet of sparrows, ladybirds, and thistledown; the advocate of earth's "meanest" creatures. He can esteem "common blades of grass" (CSPP,152); he can delight in "the simplest weed" (PJC,I,448); he can defend the much maligned ass (PJC,I,525); he can prefer the notes of the homely wren and robin to the "nightingales sick song so madly praised / In poets ryhmes" (CSPP,116). No scene fails to offer something "Which the curious love to see" (PJC,I,188); no sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

⁴³ Clare to Taylor, 7 March 1821, in Mark Storey, "A 'Missing' Letter from John Clare to John Taylor" in Notes and Queries, Feb. 1973, 54-7.

Indeed

I feel at times a love and joy
 For every weed and every thing
 A feeling kindred from a boy
 A feeling brought with every spring (CSPP, 203)

That Clare feels this relationship to be a very special one is indicated by his contempt of the "ignorant" person's indifference or blindness to natural beauty. The more he sees of other men, the more he feels that his own sensitivity is a unique gift. In his autobiographical sketches he tells us that even as a child he began "to value my abilities as superior to my companions":

When I happened with them in my Sunday walks, I often try'd their taste by pointing out some striking beauty in a wild flower, or object in the surrounding scenery, to which they could seldom make an answer; and if they did, 'twas such as "they could see nothing worth looking at," turning careless to resume their old discourse, and laughing at my "droll fancies" as they would call them.⁴⁴

Unfortunately this superiority was to become an agent of his isolation, and in 1822 we find him confiding to Taylor:

I wish I livd nearer you at least I wish London would creep within 20 miles of Helpstone I don't wish Helpstone to shift its station I live here among the ignorant like a lost man in fact like one whom the rest seems careless of having anything to do with — they hardly dare talk in my company for fear I should mention them in my writings & I find more pleasure in wandering the fields than [than] in mixing among my silent neighbours who are insensible of everything but toiling & talking of it & that to no purpose.⁴⁵

It was this very isolation that contributed so much to

⁴⁴ Edmund Blunden, ed., Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), p.67.

⁴⁵ Clare to Taylor, 8 Feb. 1822, in Letters (Tibbles, 1951), p. 132; Storey pp. 189-90.

the decline of his sanity in later years, and it is not difficult to understand the logic behind his letter to his son in 1849:

When I was a day Labourer at Bridge Casterton
& courted your Mother I knew nine languages
& could talk of them to Parsons & Gentlemen &
Foreigners but never opened my Mouth about them
to the Vulgar — for I always lived to myself ... 46

It would be wrong to suggest that Clare's opinion of his fellow-labourers was consistently low, or that his sense of superiority weighed heavily on him all the time. Like Burns he evidently had an inclination for the social life of the tavern and even turned his hand to the occasional drinking song. Middleton Murry rightly drew attention to his ambivalent attitude: "Clare was always, very obviously, in two minds about the villager. At one moment he declares him unspoiled, at another a vulgar clown; at one moment he declares that he delights in the beauties of nature, at another that he is completely insensitive to them."⁴⁷ This vacillation is not, of course, unique to Clare, and we need look no further than Bloomfield for the same kind of attitude. Bloomfield protests:

Hang the dunce
Who would not doff his cap at once
In ecstasy, when, bold and new,
Bursts on his sight a mountain-view. (The Banks of the
Wye, III, 113-16)

But elsewhere he finds:

... the veriest clown that treads the sod,
Without one scruple gives the praise to GOD.
(The Farmer's Boy,
II, 127-8)

⁴⁶ Clare to Charles Clare, 2 April 1849, in Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 301.

⁴⁷ J. Middleton Murry, op. cit. (note 22), p. 95.

For Clare the world is full of tiny miracles, "Unnoticed to vulgar eyes" (PJC,I,66); of secret delights, "seemly nothing in another's eye" (JCSP,36); of traces of eternity, "Where common skill sees nothing deemed divine" (JCSP,137). The common passer-by is described as "heedless" (PJC,II,66; SPP,103), "unobserving" (PJC,I,416), "unthinking" (PJC,II,143), "unnoting" (CSPP,143), or more severely as "A senseless lump of animated clay" (PJC,I,205). Again it is the most insignificant things that fail to make any impression on the average beholder — the brakes and ferns in autumn, for instance:

To common eyes they only seem
 A desert waste and drear;
 To taste and love they always shine,
 A garden through the year. (PJCM,58)

The occasions when Clare decides to allow some sensitivity in vulgar Hodge are rare enough to stand out when we read them. The autumn robin sings, and even "the veriest clown" cannot forbear to listen:

Pleased with thy song, in transport lost,
 He pausing mutters scraps of praise.
 (PJC,II,216)

Or again when "spring resumes its reign":

The veriest clown that hath a pulse to move
 Looks on her smiling face & falls in love. (48)

But it is only in his prose that Clare has made any sustained assessment of the peasant:

⁴⁸ W.K. Richmond, op. cit. (note 39), p. 230.

The lower orders of England from their almost total disregard of Poesy have been judged rather too harshly as destitute of the finer feelings of humanity & taste & it is a paradox yearly witnessd of the apparent apathy & unconcern with which they witness the tragedy of death displaying farces as seemingly happy as on a holiday excursion yet these very people will stand around an old ballad singer & with all the romantic enthusiasm of pity shed tears⁴⁹ over the doggerel tales of imaginary distress

The frustration that Clare felt at the fickleness of his village neighbours must have been acute at times, and must have served to heighten his sense of the poet's mission. The most common image of Man that Clare evokes is the image of Man the Intruder. Nature's solitude is violated (SC,50;110); Nature's creatures are tortured and slain (CSPP,126-31). The title of one of Clare's poems is simply "The Destroyer" (PJC,II,283), and elsewhere he notes that Man is the only creature who exploits Nature "for his gains" (SPP,80). All Nature he feels to be in harmony, with only one exception:

Proud man, still seems the enemy of all. (PJC,II,145)
 Clare's answer to this state of affairs is to turn more and more towards the escape of solitude, and I shall be discussing this reaction in my next chapter; at this point I would simply indicate the relevance of this tendency:

I love to hide me on a spot that lies
 In solitudes where footsteps find no track
 To make intrusions ... (PJC,II,125)

What I want to emphasise in all this is the isolation of the poet, the depth of his attachment to Nature, and the

⁴⁹ Prose (Tibbles, 1951; see above, note 40), p. 221.

uniqueness of his vision. John Wilson, writing in 1835, touched on these characteristics with much insight:

It is usual to speak of the hidden beauties of nature. But what is there to hide the most secret from our eyes? Nothing. Nature wears no veil — at least it is transparent — and often laid aside; but most men are at the best sand-blind. Their eyes are not to blame — but their minds — their hearts — and their souls. Poets alone see. Poetry shows this earth to those who have been looking at it all their days and yet have seldom seen the sights that make it so beautiful.⁵⁰

Alongside this let us place Clare's own portrait of "rustic genius":

And as he rambled in each peaceful round
He'd fancy friends in everything he found,
Muttering to cattle — ay, and even flowers,
As one in visions, claim'd his talk for hours.
And he'd oft wonder where we naught could see,
On blades of grass and leaves upon the tree,
And pointed often in a wild surprise
To trifling hues of gadding butterflies ...
(PJC, I, 498-9)

Or consider this stanza, from a poem simply entitled "Poesy":

Springs came not, as they yearly come
To low and vulgar eyes,
With here and there a flower in bloom,
Green trees, and brighter skies:
Thy fancies flushed my boyish sight,
And gilt its earliest hours;
And Spring came wrapt in beauty's light,
An angel dropping flowers.
(PJC, I, 447)

There is one notion in common to both of these extracts and to the passage from the autobiographical sketches quoted above: it is the notion of "fancy". If one is looking for a single word to characterize Clare's special relationship with Nature, then "fancy" is that word;

⁵⁰ Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, July 1835, 231-47; Storey p. 227.

when using it, however, we must make one distinction. It is not Coleridge's distinction between Fancy and Imagination that I have in mind — Clare observes no such niceties — but a differentiation between what can only be called the "fancies of Nature" and the "fancies of Man". It is the latter that Clare is thinking of when he writes to De Wint about the desire of some painters to put Nature in fancy dress: for Clare there is no need to give to Nature those "little touches of their fancies & vagaries to make her beautiful which I consider deformities ..."⁵¹ Again in his Essay on Landscape he condemns the perpetrators of those "modern fancy Landscapes where we often meet a group of cattle indiscriminately [sic] intermixed just as they fancied not as they found them ..."⁵² Charles Russell, despite his sound emphasis on the importance of Clare's "relationship" with Nature, concludes from such comments that: "Basically ... [Clare] holds that the artist should represent those things visible to the eye without infusing the scene with those things visible to the imagination."⁵³ One does not need to look very far into Clare's poetry, however, to see that he very frequently appeals to the imagination, and it is clear that the "fancies of Nature" are quite admissible:

⁵¹ Clare to De Wint, 19 Dec. 1829, in Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 239.

⁵² Prose (Tibble, 1951), p. 214.

⁵³ C.A. Russell, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 80-1.

when nature dreams herself into extravagant
 vagaries & fancy pictures they are always
 beautiful fancys & who hath not seen some of
 these vagaries on beholding a Forrest
 cloaked in the magic foliage of a snowstorm
 — while walking in the fields in winter
 when the snow hung in light fairey shadows
 upon every tree & bush & tiny stalk of
 witherd herbage — what beautiful bits of
 effective landscape hang about the skirts of
 a forrest with its shelterd cowsheds
 underneath its magnificent branches glows
 like a scene of faireyland ...⁵⁴

The distinction is not always easy to make, especially when Clare defines "beauty" in one poem as "nothing but the power / Which the admirer gives ... " (PJC, II, 271), but in general he does not object to a consciousness of mystery or fantasy in a scene, provided the details of the scene are not distorted. The scene depicted should be beautiful enough in itself to evoke images of angels or fairies, without the artist's having to impose such images on the landscape in an "unnatural" way. Thus Clare can speak enthusiastically of Nature's "faireyland", and at the same time criticise J.H. Reynolds's poetry for having "too much ado about lilies faireys & roseys."⁵⁵ For Clare it is never a matter of fancy alone: the fancy must be firmly rooted in fact, and not until the precise details of a scene have been furnished may the poet proceed to draw out its imaginative qualities. It is this ability to apprehend the landscape imaginatively as well as factually that makes the poet's vision such a special one. It is this gift that sets him above other

⁵⁴ Prose (Tibble, 1951), p. 214.

⁵⁵ Clare to Taylor, early 1821, in Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 92.

men, and puts him in the position of interpreter of the voice of God in Nature. I shall be discussing the specifically religious aspects of Clare's "fancy" in chapter four, but for the moment I want to look at some of the subsidiary applications of the word in his poetry.

The word "fancy" occurs more than a hundred times in Clare's work, and there is a wide variety of images associated with it. It is "fancy's eye" that converts an empty street into a concourse of soldiers, "In all the grand array of pomp and power" (PJC,II,327), that sees "plunging monsters" in a swollen river (CSPP,165), that interprets the sunset as a vision of "cities, palaces, and golden hills" (PJC,II,304). It is the ear of fancy that hears "a voice in trees and flowers" (SC,41) and encourages "the very weeds to sing and talk / Of their delights" (PJC,II,147). It is the spirit of fancy that feels the presence in the wind of "My hearts companion poesy" (SPP,123) and imbibes the sense of "mystery" associated with a path through the woods (PJC,II,144). Flowers are filled "with little mystic shining seed" (JCSP,187), while insects are "Deformed remnants of the fairy-days" (PJC,I,268). Birds, especially, are associated with mystery and enchantment: the landrail, for instance, is thought of as "some fairey", "A very Spirit to my wandering thought"⁵⁶, and "a fancy everywhere, / A sort of living doubt" (PJC,II,228);

⁵⁶ W.K. Richmond, op. cit. (note 39), p. 234.

in a letter to Hessey Clare describes this same bird as "a little thing heard about the grass & wheat in summer & one of the most poetical images in rural nature tis like a spirit you may track it by its noise a whole day & never urge it to take wing."⁵⁷ Clare is constantly looking for "poetical images" of this sort, images which have a fanciful significance as well as a purely descriptive value. Some twenty poems show a sudden delight in changing from botanical observation to "fairy phantasies", and the fairy metaphor is just one of the many that Clare uses to express the enchanting animation of the natural world. Excited by the discovery of "fairy-rings" on the grass, Clare tells us that his mind

Grows into worship of these mysteries,
While fancy doth her ancient scrolls unbind
That time hath hid in countless centuries;
And when the morning's mist doth leave behind
The fuzz-ball round, and mushroom white as snow,
They strike me, to romantic moods inclined,
As shadows of things modelled long ago ...
(PJC, II, 139)

One of Clare's favourite "mysteries" is the ever-changing shape of cloud-formations in the sky, and this particular source of imaginative inspiration is a pointer to the religious potential of fancy's visions. Clare was probably familiar with Thomson's sunsets:

[the sun] with various ray,
Lights up the clouds, those beauteous robes
of heaven,
Incessant rolled into romantic shapes,
The dream of waking fancy!
(Seasons, II, 1373-76)

⁵⁷ Clare to Hessey, Aug. 1823, in Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 154.

Poets after Thomson became accustomed to lifting up their eyes for sights of splendour and glimpses of the divine.

Beattie looks on "cloud stupendous" and declares:

Fancy a thousand wondrous forms describes,
More wildly great than ever pencil drew ...
(The Minstrel, I, LIII)

while Bloomfield makes the obvious comparison between fleecy clouds and a flock of sheep, which

... to the raptur'd mind aloud proclaim
Their MIGHTY SHEPHERD's everlasting Name.
(The Farmer's Boy, IV, 261-2)

To Clare's eye there are many shapes and beauties in the clouds, which "unto fancy lie" (PJC, II, 321): he may see "dark woods in the sky" (PJC, II, 486), or "other happy lands ... passing in the clouds / In oriental beauties" (PJCM, 215). His was the sensibility "That fancied friends in tree, and flower, and brook, / Shaped clouds to angels and beheld them smile" (JCSP, 131). In "The Pleasures of Spring" Clare beholds a shepherd lying on his back, and feels his way into this day-dreamer's visions:

Lifting his fancies to each passing cloud
& shaping every one that journeys proud
O'er its mysterious way to forms & things
That Fancy's visions to his memory brings
Some like to rocks gleam on his wondering eye
'Mid shoreless seas & some go swifter bye
Like ships that onward other worlds pursue ...
Some, white like pallaces of marble, seem
The towers of Heaven, scaled in many a dream
& to his waking fancys grandly shine
The abodes of One whom instinct owns divine. (58)

Fancy clearly has the power to direct the poet's thoughts to God, and in recognizing this power we become aware of

⁵⁸ W.K. Richmond, op. cit. (note 39), pp. 232-3.

one of Clare's channels of divinization. Clare the dedicated botanist, the faithful recorder of fact, can lift the commonplace into the divine through the intensity of his love. The mundane sights and sounds of Helpstone become

... strange landscapes of delight and joy,
 Beauty's delightful places, where the eye
 Sees things more fair than earth hath ever known.
 (PJC, II, 303)

Unfortunately, as Clare was to discover, the close relationship between fact and fantasy does not always work in the poet's favour. What was to happen when the facts began to change — when the familiar open fields were ploughed up and fenced off, when the favourite stands of trees fell to the axe, when the birds and animals were shot for the sake of the national economy? To take away these common objects is to sever the roots of fancy: "fancys visions" and "Nature herself" are interdependent ("Decay", CSPP, 204; cf. "Death of Beauty", JCSP, 193). The result of such a dislocation is, as we should expect, a constant harking back to the days of his youth and a nostalgia for the unspoiled pre-enclosure landscape; this search for refuge in the past has a peculiar pathos in Clare's asylum work where fact and fantasy become no longer distinguishable. I want to explore Clare's attachment to the past in my next chapter, but before doing so I would draw attention to the very close association in Clare's mind of "the past" with "fancy". In linking these two words I am not necessarily suggesting that Clare is a disciple of Hobbes, Locke, and Hartley, though he occasionally uses Hartleyan terms by accident:

Associations sweet each object breeds
And fine ideas upon fancy feeds (CSPP, 152)

Clare does not weigh his terminology philosophically, and it would be difficult to place him in a Hobbes-Coleridge continuum. Certainly he would disagree with Blake's dictum that "Imagination has nothing to do with Memory", but his belief in the religious power of fancy would seem equally to alienate him from the empiricists. One is tempted to attribute to him a half-perceptive, half-creative vision, and yet Clare has no traffic with such terms. Fancy for him is simply everything that is delightful, everything that is sacred, everything that belongs to an idealized remembrance of things past. It is in this last sense that imagination and memory are associated; on hearing the "little tales / Of laughing children" Clare remarks:

While my fancy shares
Their artless talk, man's sturdy reason quails,
And memory's joy grows young again with theirs.
(JCSP, 136)

"[Clare's] writings are nothing else," wrote Edmund Blunden in 1931, "but the record of a strife with circumstance for the privilege of the child's clarity through years that obscure it."⁵⁹ Childhood was the time of fancy — "And fancy then was true" (PJC, II, 28). Robert Bloomfield had made the same association in 1822: "The word 'fancy' connects itself with my very childhood, fifty years back ... "⁶⁰ Present reality, it appears,

⁵⁹ Edmund Blunden, "On Childhood in Poetry" in Votive Tablets (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), pp. 338-9; Storey p. 381.

⁶⁰ Robert Bloomfield, preface to May-Day with the Muses (1822; facsimile rpt. Westmead, Hants.: Gregg International Publishers Ltd., 1971), vol. III, p. 118.

is the destroyer of childhood's clarity of vision, and Clare is constantly opposing the notions of "fancy" and "reality" to show his profound reverence for "the memory of past pleasure's day" (PJC, I, 284). He praises Lamb for his use of fancy to break through "the dull gloom of earth's realities" (JCSP, 136); he celebrates the romance of fancy's "world-forgetting mood" (PJC, II, 123); he laments that "smoking chimneys" make "feelings faery visions fade away" (CSPP, 176). From his confinement at the asylum he pictures the "scenes and objects" of his childhood, and mourns: "Though not such fancys do I now pursue" (LPJC, 55); or calls to mind a girl he once loved, and grieves:

In the yellow gorse I see her,
 But that's wi' fancy's eye,
 For I'm longing to be wi' her
 While in prison bonds I lie. (PJC, II, 498)

The word which Clare most often uses as a contrast to the sacredness of the past is the word "reason". Clare's denunciation of "manhood's reason" (JCSP, 136) is unlikely to have been inspired by any first-hand knowledge of Hume's philosophy, but the tide of romanticism had swept Reason away and Clare need not have looked very far for vindications of Faith, Instinct, and Imagination. Wordsworth's "shades of the prison-house" are echoed in Clare's apprehension of wordly cares "hovering round our growing years" — and Clare goes on:

The warmth of fancys wildest hours ...
 Has swoond in reasons strife (SC, 41)

Elsewhere Clare speaks of "blind reason" (PJC, I, 519), "the blight of reason" (LPJC, 44), and "Knowledge, the root of evil" (PJC, I, 520). Coleridge may have believed that

reason and fancy are coadunate, but for Clare it seems to be much more a case of black and white. To contemplate the Deity, Clare must "rise above myself o'er Reason's shrine" (PJC,II,111), though perhaps he momentarily forgets himself in "Verses on Life" when he allows "reason" to procure "A passport for eternity." (PJC,II,207). In the passage from "The Pleasures of Spring" quoted above, it is "instinct" that acknowledges the presence of God, and Clare goes on from there to glorify those moments when

Man's reason keeps its wisdom out of sight
 Leaving the sweets of Fancy running wild
 & half remains, as he hath been, a child. (61)

My purpose in this chapter has been to suggest that while Clare is not exempt from the charges that have been levelled at all descriptive poets, his painstaking attention to details is the product of something more than a "botanical" or "photographic" mentality. For Clare the "genius loci" must be evoked with precision and detail, but his sympathies are humanitarian rather than scientific. The rareness of his own sensibility leads Clare to lament the "vulgar" person's indifference to Nature, and to extol the poet as someone in a special relationship: the poet must see what all others fail to notice. Moreover, the poet's perception of Nature is heightened by fancy, and this gift of fancy assumes such importance to Clare that it comes to stand for all that is good in the past, as opposed to the barrenness of "manhood's reason". Clare's overwhelming desire is to

⁶¹ W.K. Richmond, op. cit. (note 39), p. 233.

recapture the intensity of that gift, to be once more, "as he hath been, a child." In my next chapter I shall be looking at the image of childhood in some detail as one of the manifestations of Clare's attachment to the past. I shall also be discussing the effect of Clare's nostalgic vision on his social outlook, his growing tendency to withdraw from social contact into private myth, and his taste for a landscape which reinforces his quest for spiritual freedom. Clare's yearning for the golden age of innocence and liberty, I shall argue, is in the nature of a search for the permanence of eternity and the sanctity of the divine.

CHAPTER THREE: THE DIVINIZATION OF THE PAST

"Oh, happy Eden of those golden years" (JCSP, 6)

Although I have been suggesting that there are as many critical impressions of Clare as there are critics, I am bound to admit that Clare is a deceptively "simple" poet. Many of the antitheses that have emerged from my comparison of appraisals are attributable to a lack of awareness of the "chain of contradictions" that Clare himself recognized as the bondage of his life. I think I may state with reasonable confidence, despite some diagnostic controversy,¹ that Clare was a

¹ The view that Clare's madness had its origin in dissipation or in heredity was discredited by Geoffrey Grigson's contention in his introduction to PJCM (1949) that Clare's disorder was schizophrenic, a contention supported by an unpublished doctoral thesis by Eleanor Nicholes ("The Shadowed Mind: a study of the change of style of the poetry of John Clare resulting from the effects of the schizophrenic process," New York, 1950) and cited by Ernst Kris in his Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953). In 1953, however, Dr. Thomas Tennent gave it as his view that Clare's madness was cyclothymic (or manic-depressive) (see Journal of Mental Science, Jan. 1953), and this was corroborated by Dr. Russell Brain in Some Reflections on Genius (London: Pitman Medical Press, 1960). Paul Schwaber's thesis on Clare, "Stays Against Confusion: the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 27 (1967), 1794A (Columbia) disregards Tennent and Brain and concurs with Grigson, Nicholes, and Kris (see ch.6). More recently Robert Pinsky has admitted

manic-depressive, and thus it is understandable that a good many readers should emphasise the joyousness and exhilaration of his poetry, while as many more will see him as the victim of melancholy and despair. One could tabulate the record of his childhood delights, his stimulating friendships, his bursts of fame, and his enduring love of the natural world, and then proceed to cancel out each one by reference to his loneliness, his protracted illnesses, his attempted suicide, and his long years of incarceration. To read Clare's poetry is to experience a constant tension between the moments of joy and the interludes of depression. Who can say at what point such tension becomes mental derangement? However "mad" Clare may have become, he never lost the integrity of an honest inquirer into life's complexities, even if his inquiry was unrewarded by Wordsworthian calm —

Some called it madness — so indeed it was,
 If child-like fruitfulness in passing joy,
 If steady moods of thoughtfulness matured
 To inspiration, sort with such a name ...
(Prelude, III,
 149-52)

The "child-like fruitfulness" is Clare's, but his moods are scarcely "steady" — and yet, I think, his confusion is the genuine response of a man who has thought long and deeply, and who has found no easy answers. In this

that psychoanalytic terms are "suspect", but offers the diagnosis of "paranoia" (see R. Pinsky, "That Sweet Man, John Clare" in The Rarer Action: essays in honour of Francis Fergusson, ed. A. Cheuse and R. Koffler; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971). See also note 34 below.

chapter I want to explore one of the major problems that occupied Clare's thought — the problem of finding permanence in a changing world — and to characterize his divinization of the past not as a glibly pious response but as the last refuge of a troubled mind.

The time-honoured ubi sunt theme would seem to have a particular relevance to the manic-depressive temperament. The nostalgic habit of calling up "the remembrances of days gone by" (PJC,II,122) generates both delight (in a fond memory) and despair (in the fact that a fond memory is all that remains), and it is with these two emotions, associated in Clare's mind with "fancy" and "reason" respectively, that the poet must constantly grapple, without any final reconciliation.

Where are they gone the joys and fears
The links the life of other years
I thought they bound around my heart
So close that we could never part
Till reason like a winters day
Nipt childhoods visions all away (SC,19)

The shades of the prison-house that closed around Clare were no figure of speech, and not for him were the "years that bring the philosophic mind." If his meditations on days gone by gain in poignancy on account of his asylum confinement, they are nevertheless remarkably persistent in all stages of his work, and some of his images recur many years apart. In the very early "What is Life?" Clare describes happiness

as "A bubble on the stream / That in the act of siezing [sic] shrinks to nought" (CSPP,53); in "Nothingness of Life", published in 1835, the poet beholds "earth's bubbles, youth so eager sought, / Burst into emptiness of lost delight" (PJC,I,521); and in "Child Harold", written at High Beech Asylum, he tells us that his mind was full of good intentions he would have followed — "but life turned a bubble" (LPJC,40). The image conveys the elusiveness and fragility of life's joys, and accords very well with the style of random impressionism which I have discussed in chapter one. It may be objected that Clare simply took over this rather conventional image from his reading of eighteenth-century poetry, the most likely source being the close of Edward Young's second satire on "Love of Fame" (1728):

For what are men who grasp at praise sublime,
But bubbles on the rapid stream of time ...
(285-6)

The objection is partly valid, in that Clare was well acquainted with the school of Miltonic melancholy, and probably even more familiar with the endless Elizabethan variations on the "vanity of vanities" theme, but to think of his disillusionment as deriving from a venerable literary tradition is to miss its validity as a personal experience.

Certainly Clare is at his weakest when lamenting the passing of Time in such a general way that his

expression of grief fails to move us: "Ruins of Pickworth" (PJC,I,53), "Antiquity" (PJC,I,412), "On Seeing a Skull on Cowper Green" (PJC,II,68), "The Vanities of Life" (PJC,II,181), "The Triumphs of Time" (PJC,II,195), and so on — the titles alone are a fair indication of what to expect, though even in these laboured pieces Clare's characteristic vocabulary occasionally breaks through, as when he opposes Mystery to Reason in a second poem on "Antiquity" (PJC,II,110). When we come to look for more personal statements of loss, however, we find virtually no end of examples, and their sincerity is unquestionable. Sometimes it is just a simple phrase, the merest hint of sadness, that can change our whole response to a poem: "as I shall feel no more" (PJC,I,167); "but where is pleasure gone" (SPP,138). Clare's prose fragment of 1841 entitled "Fen Description — Autumn" is a good illustration of this habit — and I use the word "habit" rather than "technique" because he introduces a note of sadness with utter spontaneity. In the middle of a description of shepherds and meadows and townships Clare breaks off:

time makes strange work with early fancys
 the fancied riches & happiness of early life
 fades to shadows of less substance even than
 the shadows of dreams,² I sigh for what is
 lost & cannot help it

² J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Prose of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 242.

More frequently the recollective strain will be prompted by particular stimuli, such as the sight of a flower's transient bloom (PJC, I, 270 and 352), the onset of autumn (PJC, I, 271 and 525-6), or the memento mori signified by a great oak stump (PJC, II, 135). A bird sings, and Clare is made aware of "The happy storys of the past again" (CSPP, 116); a church-bell rings, and the poet feels "A melancholly joy at rest / A pleasurable pain" (CSPP, 181). Castles, milestones, tombstones, sunsets, dead leaves, landscapes both desolately barren and startlingly beautiful: all these have the power to induce in Clare a longing for a time before or beyond the present, or more accurately, for that state of timelessness he calls "eternity".

As an illustration of the relevance of Clare's longing for the past to his apparently manic-depressive temperament I would draw attention to his acute awareness of the correlativity of different periods of time to certain states of mind in the following lines taken from seven different poems:

The pleasant past the future sorrow (CSPP, 48)

... the fickle reign
Of present happiness and future pain (PJC, I, 531)

Where'er the present leads us, there we spy
The past in mourning ... (PJC, II, 66)

The past is o'er, the present is distress
(PJC, II, 306)

The present is the funeral of the past (LPJC, 107)

Past joys are present sorrow (LPJC, 146)

I look on the past and I dread the tomorrow (³)

The past emerges from this tally as the only happy period in the poet's life, and yet it is the memory of that happiness which activates his present despair and his fears for the future. Significantly, the kind of "heaven" that Clare imagines is one where past, present, and future are inextricably fused, and consequently no longer in opposition:

Say maiden wilt thou go with me
In this strange death of life to be
To live in death and be the same
Without this life or home or name
At once to be and not to be
That was and is not — yet to see
Things pass like shadows — and the sky
Above, below, around us lie.

The land of shadows wilt thou trace
And look nor know each others face
The present mixed with reasons gone
And past and present all as one
Say maiden can thy life be led
To join the living with the dead
Then trace thy footsteps on with me
We're wed to one eternity (CSPP, 224)

In one of the most confused of all Clare's poems, a song beginning "I fly from all I prize the most", the poet once more shuns the hostility of the present and yearns for "something that my heart hath been", but again his more substantial hopes are founded on the realization "That time to-day keeps stealing on / To that ye call eternity. / ... And all now doubt will

³ Julian Park, "Unpublished Poems by John Clare" in University of Buffalo Studies, June 1937, 54-67; this line is on p. 65.

soon be true." The poem might end there, on a note of vague self-assurance, but Clare goes on to particularize his vision:

To thee, my love, and only thee,
 The spring and summer seemeth true.
 Thy looks are like the flowers I see,
 Thy eyes like air-bells filled with dew.
 Thy look is that of happiest love,
 And playful as the summer sea.
 Thy health is from the skies above,
 And heaven itself is full of thee. (PJCM, 143-4)

One almost senses a sudden loss of confidence in eternity in this desperate clinging to human affections, a latent anguish similar to that of the closing lines of "Autumn Morning", where the poet appeals for sanity:

Oh God, give me the joy to find
 A calm in autumn's morning. (PJC, II, 264)

Nevertheless there is a gentle solace to be found in the imaginative fusion of past, present, and future, though the frailty of "air-bells filled with dew" may be indicative of the frailty of Clare's belief in the ultimate realization of heaven on earth. The painful result of such a fusion may turn out to be merely a confusion of fancy and reality, leaving the poet in a state of complete deracination:

O for one real imaginary blessing
 Ideal real blessing blasted through
 With sin and yet how rich is the carressing
 Of love as mothers kisses sweet as Hermon dew
 A bright grey eye or black it knocks mine through
 And leaves them dim as stars fall'n from above
 Electric shocks they come from God knows who
 Milk maids have eyes the pictures of the doves
 That thrill through bones and marrow is it Love
 (LPJC, 144)

It is necessary to look more closely into the nature

of Clare's sense of loss to explain his quest for permanence, a quest which David Perkins regards as underlying the symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats.⁴ Clare's sadness is not some vague world-weariness, but is closely tied to changes in his physical environment. An entry in his journal of 1824 is characteristic:

Took a walk in the fields saw an old wood stile taken away from a favourite spot which it had occupied all my life the posts were overgrown with Ivy & it seemd so akin to nature & the spot where it stood as tho it had taken it on lease for an undisturbd existance [sic] it hurt me to see it was gone for my affections claims a friendship with such things but nothing is lasting in this world⁵

Clare's earliest poems strike this note, partly encouraged by Goldsmith's "Deserted Village", but more potently inspired by his own experience of change. Cherished trees are cut down (PJC, I, 124 and II, 101), "old favourite spots" are desecrated (PJC, II, 124), old customs and festivities are neglected (SC, 69 and 126). A "naked stream" seems to address him in despair:

The balks and eddings are no more,
 The pastures too are gone,
 The greens, the meadows and the moors
 Are all cut up and done;
 There's scarce a greensward spot remains
 And scarce a single tree;
 All naked are thy native plains,
 And yet they're dear to thee. (PJC, I, 73)

⁴ David Perkins, The Quest for Permanence: the Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959).

⁵ Prose (Tibbles, 1951; see note 2 above), pp. 109-10.

Looking back over Clare's life one can perhaps discern three phases of his nostalgia. At the end of his life his regret is for lost love, lost opportunities, and a lost home. He may amuse himself by calling to mind the old sights and sounds of his youth:

There's places in our village streets
Where I dearly loved to be
The round cross full o' stoney seats
At the stable end the tree ... (LPJC, 223)

Or his reminiscences may be restless with longing:

But alas! my vision dims —
The trees are not the trees
Under which I used to play,
And the flowers — they cannot please,
For I am sad to-day.

When shall my mind awake
In its own loved scenes again? (PJCM, 137)

An earlier phase (1832) is the time of his move from Helpstone to Northborough, only three miles up the road, but far enough to involve a loss of "all the old associations."⁶ "The Flitting" (CSPP, 196), "Remembrances" (CSPP, 193), and "Decay" (CSPP, 204) are the results of this dislocation; in them Clare expresses his bewilderment and insecurity in an unfamiliar environment:

Strange scenes mere shadows are to me
Vague unpersonifying things (CSPP, 199)

Looking back even further we find the first allusions to his melancholy rather more difficult to account for, though they claim our notice in more than twenty poems. Loosely we may characterize this phase as

⁶ J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Letters of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 257.

registering his reaction to enclosure, though I stress "loosely" because John Barrell has devoted much energy to discrediting the impact of enclosure on Helpstone, and has argued that Clare's genuine response to local changes is obscured by his use of traditional language.⁷ It is no doubt valid to argue with Clare's sociology and diction, but the sincerity of his convictions is not in question. "Enclosure" happens to be Clare's most usual word for summing up the erosion of familiar scenes, and though his terminology may be naive, his own experience is bitterly real. Bloomfield seems to have encountered something of the same thing, since he speaks of "Regret for Devastation by Enclosures" in his tale "The Broken Crutch" (headnote to lines 57-78), though Donald Davie apparently sees this as attitudinizing.⁸ A good deal of attention has been given to Clare's poems on enclosure and critics have recognized in them the true voice of feeling. "Clare goes beyond the external observation of the poems of protest and of melancholy retrospect," writes Raymond Williams. "What happens in him is that the loss is internal."⁹ Robert Waller has devoted an article to the same point, and has urged that: "The

⁷ See John Barrell, appendix to The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place (Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 189-215.

⁸ New Statesman, 19 June 1964, 964; Storey p. 442.

⁹ Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 141.

spirit and insight of Clare was never more needed by the British people than today."¹⁰ Middleton Murry quotes copiously from the enclosure poems in his revaluation of Clare,¹¹ and the theme has been ably explored by writers of theses.¹² Clare's attitude is found to be uncompromising, indignant, defiant, but the individual sensibility is powerless against economic principles. Those who perpetrate the enclosure system or threaten Nature's "unsullied pride" are styled as "savage men" (SPP,166) "mongrel men" (PJC,I,422), "tyrant knaves" (PJC,I,531), "hypocrites" (PJC,II,19). Enclosure itself is "a curse upon the land" (JCSP,50), a "buonaparte" (CSPP,196), spreading a "mildew" over the earth (SC,61) and trampling "on the grave / Of labours rights" (CSPP,188). The environmental changes may have been slow to evolve, but Clare experiences them as a violent confrontation:

¹⁰ Robert Waller, "Enclosures: the Ecological Significance of a Poem by John Clare" in Mother Earth: Journal of the Soil Association, July 1964, 231-7.

¹¹ See J. Middleton Murry, "Clare Revisited" in Unprofessional Essays (London: Cape, 1956), especially pp. 89-109.

¹² See E.J. Bush, "The Poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 32 (1971), 3295A (Wisconsin) and Janet M. Todd, "In Adam's Garden: a Study of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 768A (Florida).

But who can tell the anguish of his mind,
 When reformation's formidable foes
 With civil wars 'gainst nature's peace combin'd,
 And desolation struck her deadly blows,
 As curst improvement 'gan his fields inclose:
 O greens, and fields, and trees, farewell,
 farewell!

His heart-wrung pains, his unavailing woes
 No words can utter, and no tongue can tell,
 When ploughs destroy'd the green, when groves of
 willows fell. (JCSP, 49)

Parallel with this outcry against enclosure runs Clare's criticism of what he considers to be its accompanying social ills, and here again we must sort out the generalized response to rather abstract vices from that which is fired by personal experience. It was easy enough, from his reading of Thomson, to make a "literary" plea against social injustice:

Ah! little think the gay licentious proud,
 Whom pleasure, power, and affluence surround —
 They, who their thoughtless hours in giddy mirth,
 And wanton, often cruel, riot waste —
 Ah! little think they, while they dance along,
 How many feel, this very moment, death
 And all the sad variety of pain ...
 (Seasons, IV, 322-8)

Oh, thou charm which Plenty crowns,
 Fortune! smile, now winter frowns:
 Cast around a pitying eye;
 Feed the hungry, ere they die.
 Think, oh! think upon the poor,
 Nor against them shut thy door;
 Freely let thy bounty flow
 On the sons of want and woe. (JCSP, 14)

"Gain", "fashion", "oppression", "wealth" and so on are familiar targets of eighteenth-century satire, and Clare frequently engages in battle with these monsters. His method is similar to that of Burns in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" (1786): the honest, rustic harvester (PJC, I, 56), woodman (PJC, I, 198), or cress-gatherer

(PJC, I, 219) is elevated to a status far above that of the pampered aristocracy, though a fierce hatred of greed and self-interest heavily outweighs any lurking sentimentality. Clare's letters reveal a passionate loathing of corruption, double-dealing, and patronizing flattery,¹³ and it is hardly surprising that when he began turning his hand to critical essays for the monthly journals, his topics should be "Pride", "Mock Modesty and Morals", "Affectation", "False Appearances", "Popularity", "Money Catching", "Fashion", and the like.¹⁴ Only Crabbe and Cobbett come near him in his thirst for social justice, yet the quantity and quality of Clare's social criticism have too often been forgotten in the effort to idealize him as a naive rustic minstrel. Regrettably a detailed study of Clare's social outlook lies beyond the scope of this thesis, but insofar as his conscience reflects his belief in modern society's corruption of the past it warrants some attention here.

Clare's most complete statement of social criticism is his long satire "The Parish", written mainly between 1820 and 1824 but not published in the poet's

¹³ See e.g. Letters (Tibble, 1951; see note 6 above), pp. 213-14.

¹⁴ See Prose (Tibble, 1951), pp. 6 and 206-25.

lifetime.¹⁵ "Tyranny", "flattery", "cheating", "whoring", "gaming", "hypocrisy", "cant" : such words abound in "The Parish", but Clare has tied each one to a keenly satirical sketch or portrait. The upstart landholder is depicted as the contemptible nouveau riche, hiring footmen and coaches for the convenience of his coquettish daughters and dandified sons. Petty bureaucrats haryass the poor while unconcerned clergymen amuse themselves at fox-hunting. As quacks, politicians, evangelical ranters, tax-gatherers and workhouse-overseers take their place in Clare's gallery of rogues, the poet's language grows in vehemence:

¹⁵ The fullest text of "The Parish" available is that of Elaine Feinstein in her John Clare: Selected Poems (London: University Tutorial Press, 1968), pp. 45-81. Miss Feinstein prints 1186 lines, compared with Mrs. Tibble's 1030 lines in JCSP (reprinted from J.W. Tibble, PJC,I), but the former number does not include all of the latter, so that the JCSP or PJC text is still valuable for some 212 lines not in Feinstein. A further 30 lines were printed for the first time by Robinson and Summerfield in CSPP, bringing the total number of lines in print to 1428. The fragmentary editing of this fine poem is to be regretted, and a comparison of the three printed sources shows many shortcomings, especially on the part of the Tibbles, who do not acknowledge the extent of their editorial cuts, and of Miss Feinstein, who frequently makes her excisions in mid-sentence, and occasionally fails to indicate a cut.

The vilest thing ne'er crawled without
 its brother
 And they're as like as one ass gets another
 One sets no job but t'other barks to do't
 Both for self interest lick the foulest foot
 And spite of all the meanness [sic] and the
 stink
 Picks up gains crumbles from the dirtiest
 sink (16)

Besides "The Parish" there are well over a hundred poems that display sympathy with social outcasts — beggars, gypsies, dispossessed farmers, pregnant girls, hunted animals — and it is obvious that Clare identifies himself very strongly with the underdog. In his later poems his personal involvement is deliberately masked by an objective, dispassionate view of injustice: the twenty little social portraits written at Northborough (see PJC, II, 344-54) offer only the slightest indications of the poet's attitude to the characters he describes, and yet one feels the humility or vanity, the loneliness or bumptiousness, of each in turn. The totally detached accounts of cruelty to animals written during the same period (see CSPP, 126-31) have been described by Alan Porter as "the most gruesome poems in the English language."¹⁷ The asylum poems revert to a vigorous denunciation of money-grabbers, whores, politicians, "buggar shops", "priest-craft-cant",

¹⁶ Feinstein, ed. cit. (note 15), p. 63.

¹⁷ Spectator, 23 Aug. 1924, 260-1; Storey p. 368.

"the very noise of troublous man", and though these poems are painful to read, their bitterness is no asylum quirk but is firmly rooted in Clare's past. At times he seems to lose all sense of unity of tone, so that his outbursts against vice have an arresting incongruity:

Poets love nature and themselves are love;
 The scorn of fools and mock of idle pride
 The vile in nature worthless deeds approve
 They court the vile and spurn all good beside
 Poets love nature like the calm of heaven ...
 (CSPP, 224)

Unfortunately this kind of contrast serves only to heighten Clare's sense of isolation and rejection, and in a most revealing passage of "Child Harold" he confides:

Fame blazed upon me like a comets glare
 Fame waned and left me like a fallen star
 Because I told the evil what they are (LPJC, 49)

Clare's social conscience was vented in his verse rather than in political protest. Although he recoiled at the thought of a peasants' uprising, he nonetheless favoured a return to the old pre-enclosure days of communalism relatively untainted by material competitiveness. Clare is a "revolutionary" in the most literal sense — though he distrusted the word's popular usage — and to miss this fact is to miss much of the impact of his poetry, as Maurice Hewlett has done: "Clare, like a true peasant, is a fatalist to the core. Let things be as they may, because they needs must. That is the philosophy of the peasant —

Sancho Panza's philosophy."¹⁸ Admittedly Clare envisages no drastic upheavals, but then his caution is wisely urged:

In politics I never dabbled to understand them thoroughly; with the old dish that was served to my forefathers I am content; but I believe the reading a small pamphlet on the Murder of the French King many years ago, with other inhuman butcheries, cured me very easily from thinking favourably of radicalism. The words "revolution and reform" so much in fashion with sneering arch-infidels thrill me with terror whenever I see them.¹⁹

In his "Essay on Industry" Clare clarifies his position rather shrewdly:

I am no politician but I think a reform is wanted — not the reform of the mob were [where] the bettering of the many is only an apology for improving the few — nor the reform of partys where the benefit of one is the destruction of the other but a reform that woud do good & hurt none ...²⁰

Like Duck, Burns, and Bloomfield before him, Clare is chiefly concerned with the lot of the agricultural labourer, whose misery he knows so well from first-hand experience. This is why so many of his social protests are directed against social-climbing and class-distinction, which might well be considered as his most passionate hates.²¹ Enclosure seemed to give

¹⁸ Cornhill Magazine, March 1921, 274-81; rpt. Maurice Hewlett, Wiltshire Essays (London: Humphrey Milford, 1921), pp. 58-68; Storey p. 353.

¹⁹ Edmund Blunden, ed., Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), p. 88.

²⁰ Prose (Tibbles, 1951), p. 221.

²¹ See e.g. parts of "The Parish" (Feinstein, ed. cit.,

the rich even greater opportunity to exploit the poor, and the humble peasant was pushed further into the mud as the landowner climbed on his shoulders. For Clare the only solution was to turn back the clock in an attempt to recapture the security of former days, taking the advantage of hindsight to avoid past mistakes:

England return to past days for a caution ...
Ah look back & think what the present may be (22)

Clare's attitude to social change, like his attitude to environmental disturbance, reflects a vigorous Utopianism, but it is a Utopianism rather like Rousseau's, looking forward to reform, but hoping that such reform will return mankind to a lost paradise. His social vision is naturally limited, being founded on his own observations of poverty and degradation in a provincial community rather than on any grasp of broad philosophical principles, but its very limitedness gives it the integrity of personal experience. When Clare curses "gain's rude rage" (PJC, I, 124) he is referring to the destruction of a favourite tree; when he berates "tyrant justice" (SC, 113) he has in mind the oppression of Helpstone's gypsies; when he laments "the throes of joys gone by" (PJC, I, 234) he is talking about his own loss of youthful liberty. Clare's uneasy tension between liberalism and conservatism is

pp. 46-50) and the prose extract entitled "An Apology for the Poor" (CSPP, 190-3).

²² A.J.V. Chapple, "Some Unpublished Poetical Manuscripts of John Clare" in Yale University Library Gazette, July 1956, 34-48; this poem is on pp. 45-7.

obviously attributable to the dependence of the national economy on agriculture: having to keep a wife, parents, and five children in a one-room cottage on the meagre wages of a field-labourer was sufficient stimulus to strong views on agrarian reform, while a consuming love of the local countryside in its pristine state provided an incontestable reason for maintaining the status quo. The only way out of this dilemma is to postulate some happier time in the nation's past when men were able to make a comfortable and honest living without having to do violence to the landscape or to one another's freedom, and there is a strong likelihood that this time co-incided with our childhood, when dinner was always on the table and the fields were for play.

When we look back on what we were
And feel what we are now ... (PJC,II,27)

The conclusion is irresistible.

The memory of Clare's childhood is virtually his only security. Again and again we see him sifting through the wreckage of his life for something of permanent value. There is friendship, but friendship so often proves false: flattery is a "ten days' wonder of an idle noise" (PJC,II,114), and even the "warmest-seeming" friends turn out to be "the coldest at the close" (PJC,II,99). There is virtue, a "good name" (PJC,II,70), but this is small recompense for the loss of love and beauty (see PJCM,58). There is earth's

majesty, "Outpeering time, too lofty for decay" (PJC,II,108), but a second thought reminds him that autumn leaves must "fade, and fall, and die" (PJC,II,111), that mighty oaks "less than nothings are to ruin's doom" (PJC,II,114), and that a time must come "When dead and living shall be void and null, / And nature's pillow be at last a human skull" (PJC,II,199). There is the thought of after-fame, an ambition which "burns the mind / To leave some fragment of itself behind" (CSPP,186), but at the end he knows that few will care to mourn his death (see PJC,II,375). Ultimately there is only the memory of childhood to afford any kind of relief. The currency of the childhood myth in literature from the time of Rousseau onwards has been discussed by Peter Coveney in his book The Image of Childhood,²³ and although not mentioned in Coveney's study Clare certainly concurs with Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge in their special reverence for the "seed time" of the soul. By his own admission Clare was thrown into "an ague of sensibility" by poems recollective of childhood,²⁴ and he has left us many statements of what this sensibility means:

²³ Peter Coveney, The Image of Childhood (revised edn., Penguin Books, 1967).

²⁴ Letters (Tibbels, 1951), p. 123.

There is nothing but poetry about the
 existance [sic] of childhood real simple
 soul moving poetry the laughter and joy
 of poetry and not its philosophy and
 there is nothing of poetry about manhood but
 the reflection and the remembrance of
 what has been nothing more (CSPP, 66)

The spring of our life — our youth —
 is the midsummer of our happiness —
 our pleasures are then real & heart
 stirring — they are but associations
 afterwards — where we laughed in
 childhood at the reality of the
 enjoyment felt we only smile in
 manhood at²⁵ the recollections of those
 enjoyments

This particular aspect of Clare's vision has not
 suffered from critical neglect but has been frequently
 recognized. "The intensive child-study of our day,"
 writes M. Channing-Pearce,

has familiarised us with the deep
 difference between the worlds of the
 child and the adult and cured us of
 the fond conceit that this difference
 is merely a matter of immaturity or that
 the child's world is less real than that
 of the adult. It is probably much more
 real; it is certainly much more vivid.
 The difference is due to a different
 focus, another angle of vision which
 results in different emphases and
 significance. What is significant to
 the adult is meaningless to the child
 and what is intensely real to the child
 is trivial to the adult.²⁶

This is probably an over-statement, but it is a fair
 paraphrase of romantic doctrine, to which some fifty
 or more of Clare's poems will attest. Some of these

²⁵ Prose (Tibbles, 1951), p. 225.

²⁶ M. Channing-Pearce, "John Clare" in Hibbert Journal,
 April 1941, 291-8.

poems, like "Childhood, or The Past" (CSPP,63), "Childish Recollections" (PJC,I,238), "Childhood" (PJC,I,275; PJC,II,27; and LPJC,192), "Joys of Youth" (PJC,I,278), "Joys of Childhood" (PJC,II,41), and "Boyhood Pleasures" (PJC,II,262), deal directly with the childhood experience, usually in a tone of what Clare calls "pleasurable pain" (CSPP,181), while other verses introduce the childhood motif in the course of discussing other things, frequently with an alarming but explicable suddenness.

I began this chapter by associating the feeling of "pleasurable pain" that Clare frequently experiences in contemplating the past with a manic-depressive temperament, though one should remember that the "Pleasures of Melancholy" tradition was a contributing influence, and that symptoms of Clare's illness were not definitely in evidence before 1824. "Retrospection," he tells us, is something "'tween a joy and pain" (PJC,I,187), and I believe that the latent tension between these two responses saves many a poem from being wholly mawkish or wholly gloomy. The little "Impromptu" beginning "'Where art thou wandering, little child?'" (PJC,I,247) comes close to over-sentimentality, but is saved by a restrained communication of sincere grief, while the lugubrious mood of the sonnet "Written in November" (PJC,I,276) is lightened by the memory of happier days. In both of these poems one thinks of Wordsworth, and the coincidence warrants a comparison. J.W. Tibble has

pointed the way: "Like Wordsworth's his poems are usually the record of an experience already completely realized, but unlike Wordsworth he seldom allowed an interval to elapse between the experience and its recording."²⁷ There is certainly very little Wordsworthian tranquillity in Clare's fits of sorrow and joy, and yet he frequently hails the act of recollection as a partial restorative to a troubled mind. Through the power of memory we "feel the joy renewed" (PJC, I, 368); in re-reading "childhood's little book" memory "creates anew / Love for each trifling thing" (PJC, II, 34); "thoughts of the past", especially of past love, will "many joys awaken" (JCSP, 189). The poet revisits a childhood retreat "for the sake of feelings witnessed then" and relishes "these spots that memory makes divine" (PJC, II, 62-3). In "The Pasture" he tells us:

When I stroll o'er the mole-hilly green,
 Stepping onward from hillock to hill,
 I think over pictures I've seen,
 And feel them deliciously still. (PJC, II, 91)

In "The Crab Tree" he qualifies this delight, acknowledging that "cares have ... chilled the relish which I had for joy", and that joy can never be renewed in its original intensity (CSPP, 187), except perhaps when the poet is lucky enough to find a place where "naught is changed since last I came" (PJC, II, 260).

²⁷ J.W. Tibble, introduction to PJC, I, p.viii; cf. John Taylor's introduction to Poems Descriptive (1820) in Storey p. 50.

The recollective strain is usually prompted by some trivial thing — the sight of a solitary bird (CSP,117) or the mention of a favourite flower (PJC,II,433) — but this is enough to precipitate "Pleasing associations of the past" (LPJC,55; cf. SPP, 80), which may or may not end in disquieting reminders of the present. In walking again over a route once walked in love, Clare feels a "joy like a pain" (SPP,40), and the tension is barely resolved. "With Garments Flowing" (JCSP,225) and "The Primrose Bank" (PJC,II,284) reveal the same kind of emotional vacillation, and Clare is sufficiently aware of his condition to be able to express it most succinctly in some of his songs:

Oh, haud yer tongues, ye sylvan elves,
 Yer gladness is but waes,
 And keep yer sangs within yerselves
 For maybe better days;
 Another birdie sings to me,
 Maks ither music vain,
 And fills my heart with sorrow's glee
 Till pleasure springs frae pain.
 Sae haud yer tongues, ye sylvan elves,
 And keep yer singing to yerselves.
(PJC,II,509)

One wonders what Wordsworth would have made of this!

While Clare's attitude to childhood may involve an interaction of joy and sorrow, it is evident that there is nothing equivocal about childhood itself. There are no unpleasant memories, no regrets about time mis-spent, no painful traumas to brood over.²⁸

²⁸ Paul Schwaber suggests that the early death of Clare's twin sister Elizabeth contributed to his life-long insecurity (see Paul Schwaber, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, pp. 37-40), but this is purely speculative.

The child is so utterly carefree as to be "A stranger ... to this world's storms and strife" (PJC, I, 282); gradually "man's ripening doom erodes his "golden days" (PJC, II, 42); and finally the years of adulthood close in "and fill our path with cares" (PJC, II, 126). Because Clare has reduced a long and complex process of change to a simple opposition of youth and age, and because he uses these motifs as perennial archetypes, I have referred to his escape from reality as a retreat into the "myth" of childhood, and I believe that an almost equal significance may be attached to his love of solitude.

Like the ubi sunt theme, the solitude motif has an important place in the literature of the ancients, and its prevalence in English literature after 1600, as part of the beatus ille tradition, has been traced by Maren-Sofie Røstvig in her study The Happy Man.²⁹ Clare was certainly familiar with the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets, but once again it is the eighteenth century which provides a more likely source. G.G. Williams has pointed to early manifestations of the eighteenth century's preoccupation with retirement in Needler, Addison, Chudleigh, and Lady Winchilsea, and as the century progresses it appears that the

The sight of a waggoner falling to his death from a load of hay was shocking enough to cause him "fainting fits" for many years afterward (see Sketches, note 19 above, pp. 70-1), but the incident is never mentioned in his poetry.

²⁹ Maren-Sofie Røstvig, The Happy Man, 2 vols. (revised edn., Norwegian Universities Press, 1962).

expediency of getting away from city life deepens into genuine love of rural seclusion, strengthened by Locke's insistence on the value of experience, Berkeley's argument that the world existed only as it was perceived, and Newton's discoveries of natural laws.³⁰ Clare's sympathy with eighteenth-century writers, and in this case especially with Cowper, is most evident in those passages of personification which creep into his early work, of which the long poem entitled "Solitude" (PJC, I, 190) is a prime example, though even the asylum verses on this theme may have a familiar ring:

Sweet solitude thou partner of my life
 Thou balm of hope and every pressing care ...
(LPJC, 59)

Hail Solitude still Peace and Lonely good
 Thou spirit of all joys to be alone (LPJC, 79)

Or again, one could cite perhaps a dozen poems in which Clare courts Solitude at evening and sounds like any second-rate Parnell or Collins:

Hail, lovely Eve! whose hours so lovely prove;
 Thy silent calm! to solitude so dear ...
(PJC, I, 122)

Nevertheless I have already shown (in chapter two) that Clare's impulse towards retirement was real enough, being motivated by an awareness of being different from ordinary men and a desire to cut himself off from the unsympathetic society of his fellows. Nature herself has whispered such notions to him:

³⁰ See G.G. Williams, "The Beginnings of Nature Poetry in the Eighteenth Century" in Studies in Philology, 27, 1930, 583-608.

And different pleasures filled thy breast,
 And different thy employ,
 And different feelings thou possess'd
 From any other boy. (PJC,I,72)

Even as a child, it appears, Clare was conscious of his "solitary disposition",³¹ and his admission in "The Village Minstrel" that he would "shun the playing boys whene'er they chanc'd to meet" (JCSP,35) is corroborated by his autobiography:

I never had much relish for the pastimes
 of youth instead of going out on the green
 at the town end on winter Sundays to play
 football I stuck to my corner stool poring
 over a book in fact I grew so fond of being
 alone at last that my mother was feign
 [i.e. fain] to force me into company for
 the neighbours had assur'd her mind into the
 fact that I was no better than crazy³²

Rather than apologize for his unsociability, Clare is frequently inclined to sentimentalize his own individuality in a markedly romantic fashion, though he may disguise himself in the third person:

Dark as the strangers mystery were his ways
 He wandered round the field on sabbath days
 And left to vulgar minds the noisey town
 Nor made a partner of a fellow clown
 Tracing the wood tracks over grown with moss
 Or with heath rabbits winding thro the goss
 And oft neath blackthorn shadows by the brook
 Was seen by shepherds musing oer a book
 And in his button holes was always seen
 Wild flowers — that in his rambleshe would glean
 (CSPP,104)

For all this, there is no doubt of the reality of his desire for solitude, and one notices that his favourite haunts very frequently involve a sense of seclusion.

³¹ Prose (Tibbles, 1951), p. 13.

³² ibid., p. 15.

He may seek out "the middle of a wood" (CSPP,52), or a "wildwood shady dell" (PJCM,211). He may "force a way" through briars, "The brambles tearing at my clothes" (PJC,II,51). In the shade of trees, "shut out from sun and sky", he experiences "All the deliciousness of solitude" (PJC,II,324). His Sunday walks invariably take him "Where footpaths ramble from the public way" (PJC,I,217), and he makes it quite clear that these are his favourite tracks:

Down the green slopes and fields I flew;
And through the thickest covert went,
Which hid me from the public view:
Nor was it shame, nor was it fear,
No, no, it was my own dear choice ...
(PJC,I,31-2)

Clare crosses the border between solitude and escapism as his retreats become more and more far-fetched, his moods more and more dejected. In "The Enthusiast", for instance, the weary poet wanders hermit-like, "sickened at the sight / Of life's realities", and seeks refuge in a "dream", a "half-closed eye" (JCSP,115). Solitude is again conducive to dreams in "Summer Images" (CSPP,167), and in "Lone Happiness" (PJC,II,238-9) his sense of detachment — "from the world away" — suggests a similar means of escape. There are also more physical means, characterized by impracticability: "a cave beside some rock" (JCSP,10), "a hollow oak" (PJC,II,16; cf. CSPP,186), "a tent beneath a tree" (PJC,II,302), or "some lone island" (PJC,II,305). Frequently, as we

might expect, he yearns to sweeten his exile with the company of a lover, whether imaginary (or at least unnamed) (e.g. PJC,II,76 and LPJC,168-9), or specified as Sweet Susan (LPJC,41), Mary Ann (LPJC,113), or a dozen others. Clare is a world-loser and a world-forsaker, and the impulse of his flight from the society of men is intensified as his disappointments increase with each passing year. A fondness for solitude in youth grows into a vague desire for more distant retreat, "Far away from the world, its delusions and snares" (PJC,II,90), which in time takes on a heart-felt urgency:

Oh, take this world away from me!
 Its strife I cannot bear to see,
 Its very praises hurt me more
 Than e'en its coldness did before,
 Its hollow ways torment me now
 And start a cold sweat on my brow ... (PJC,II,263)

Clare's plea was granted in 1837, but his refuge from "the rude noise of the wearisome world" (LPJC,197) was no lone island or quiet cave. His final solitude is something like that state of suspended animation which he had imaged in 1832, though I doubt whether he found in it the same consolation as Christopher Smart:

To be & not to be & still to know it
 Like toad life-buried in the solid rock ... (33)

³³ Quoted in J.W. and Anne Tibble, John Clare, A Life (second edn., London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 328; the comparison with Smart is made by Ruthven Todd in his Tracks in the Snow (London: Grey Walls Press, 1946), pp.18-19.

There were happier moments, of course, but one of the last and lingering impressions we have of Clare is the image of the hermit bee enclosed in the "green darkness" of the flower:

There I'll burry [bury] alive and in silence decay
(LPJC, 246)

Clare's urge to escape into a private sanctuary runs parallel to his retreat into recollections of early childhood, and parallel lines, we know, meet only at infinity. Only in some metaphysical existence, where time and space have ceased to have meaning, can Clare's desires for solitude and childhood's freshness of vision be fulfilled. When all earthly means of solace seem to have been exhausted, Clare turns towards the promise of what yet may be in the permanence of eternity. Thus it is that solitude comes to be associated with "sacredness of mind" (SPP, 92) and God-given peace (see LPJC, 185), and the association becomes an equation in his oft-quoted line: "And solitude and God are one to me" (PJC, II, 308). It is also significant that Clare should conceive of paradise, that state which I defined earlier as comprising "past and present all as one", in terms of the fulfilment of both desires:

I long for scenes were man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie
The grass below, above, the vaulted sky.
(CSPP, 222) ³⁴

³⁴ According to Doctors Ida Macalpine and Richard Hunter

The lines are well-known, but the ambiguity inherent in their imagery has not been recognized. The kind of paradise to which Clare is aspiring here is one in which time and space are both delimited and transcended by eternity, rather like the frieze on Keats's Grecian urn, except that Clare has frozen the perfection of a deeply satisfying period of his life rather than the unfulfilled promise of an isolated moment. Time and space have lost their power to age or to disorientate him, and are therefore no longer meaningful concepts, and yet the eternity he envisages is the eternity of a specified time ("as I in childhood sweetly slept") and of a bounded space ("The grass below, above, the vaulted sky").³⁵ This

(see "The Pathography of the Past" in Times Literary Supplement, 15 March 1974, 256-7) this poem "describes the phenomena of depersonalization and derealization which occur in disease of certain parts of the brain." This theory is useful insofar as it eliminates the symptomatology of "melancholia", "schizophrenia", and the like — "All distinctions of disease by symptoms, whether physical or mental, are bound to be eroded when causes and lesions are found" — but it is misleading in that it ignores the extent to which the theme of "depersonalization" occurs in Clare's earlier ("sane") poetry.

- ³⁵ The adjective "vaulted" suggests a definite physical enclosure and the images of grass and sky root Clare's paradise very firmly in the physical earth. The special sense of "vaulted" as "entombed" reinforces the paradox that this mortal must put on immortality. A rare exception to Clare's insistence on a heavenly paradise which recreates an earthly paradise is a stanza from the asylum poem "Remember dear Mary":

is eating one's cake and having it too — dispensing with the growth of manhood's reason and with environmental change, and yet insisting on a paradise that affirms both time and space. This paradox is closely related to the ambiguity of the word "vision" discussed at the beginning of this thesis: Clare cannot do without his grass and sky, his childhood and solitude, and yet, knowing their transience, he cannot do with them. The only solution is to convert vision into vision, to set his mind on a paradise hereafter which will eternize the fleeting joys of the past. Appropriately, Clare's word for that paradise is "Eden".

Many readers have appreciated something of the significance to Clare of the Eden myth, but not until 1966 has it been suggested that this preoccupation is strong enough to afford his work "the unity of a great scheme", of which, as I have shown in chapter two, it has been usual to bemoan the want. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield write:

Helpstone was Clare's Paradise, his Garden of Eden. This observation is no literary conceit but plain truth. ... In the landscape of Eden before the Fall, Clare's boyhood love Mary Joyce, is present — she is the Eve to Clare's Adam. Unless we recognize that this

...If love you believe in Belief is my love
 As it lived once in Eden ere we fell from
 above
 To this heartless this friendless this
 desolate earth
 And kept in first love Immortality's birth
 (LPJC, 232)

Cf. the stanza quoted above (p. 66) in which Clare envisages in eternity "the sky / Above, below, around us lie" (CSPP, 224).

is the conscious pattern of imagery in Clare's poetry, we are bound to miss a great deal of his point. Everything in his boyhood environment assumes a new character, a vividness far beyond accurate natural history, a deeper identity because it is part of what Clare calls 'Loves register'. In this 'register', not just trees, but every single tree, not just grass but every single blade of grass is a special act of the Creator and participates in the freshness before the Fall.³⁶

Following this lead, Janet Todd has devoted a doctoral dissertation (now published in part as a monograph) to this theme, tracing its chronological development primarily in Clare's pre-asylum poetry.³⁷ One of Dr. Todd's main concerns has been to remove Clare from the shadows of Wordsworth and Blake, to which he had been relegated by Harold Bloom, though it should be remembered that Bloom himself recognized Clare's desire "to find the unfallen Eden in nature" and his rejection of "the changing earthly paradise of Beulah" in favour of "the creative paradise of Eden."³⁸ I am in

³⁶ Robinson and Summerfield, introduction to CSPP, p.18.

³⁷ Janet M. Todd, "In Adam's Garden: a Study of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 768A (Florida); now published in part as In Adam's Garden: A Study of John Clare's Pre-Asylum Poetry (University of Florida Humanities Monograph Number 39, 1973). The original thesis of 231 pages has been reduced to 83 pages for the monograph publication, two of the original chapters having been excluded and the others abridged. Page numbers bracketed in the text refer to the monograph publication, unless otherwise signified.

³⁸ Harold Bloom, The Visionary Company (revised edn., New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 448 and 455; Storey pp. 431 and 438.

substantial agreement with most of Janet Todd's findings, but am inclined to place the Eden motif within a wider context of divinization. Dr. Todd readily discerns a "yoking of pure and corrupt aspects of society" in The Shepherd's Calendar (p. 21) and the symbolism of the Fall in "The Parish" (p. 62), but in shying away from Wordsworth and Blake she is reluctant to regard the Eden of Clare's lyrics as evidence of a religious quest for permanence. Clare's concept of "eternity", according to Dr. Todd, "is always earthly and cyclical, not metaphysical and spiritual. ... he makes it quite clear that the eternity of earth is not a metaphysical attribute such as belongs to God, but an earthly, very long length of time." (P. 36).

I shall be returning to the word "eternity" in my chapter on the divinization of Nature, but for the moment I shall concern myself with Eden as the epitome of Clare's attachment to the past. The theme occurs in as many as forty poems, some as early as 1809, others as late as the 1850's, and is generally made explicit by reference to "Eden", "paradise", or "Adam and Eve". Janet Todd is quite correct in associating Eden with the pre-enclosure landscape and with the childhood response to the natural world, though she has passed by some key illustrations of this association.³⁹ The wild heaths and free commons, for

³⁹ Only two or three of the textual and critical

instance, though lacking in romantic "adornings", are dear enough to the poet to have been "lov'd as an Eden" (JCSP,63), and a child stooping down to pluck a daisy reminds him of the wonderment of Adam and Eve in the paradisial garden (see SPP,110). The growing child's loss of that wonderment as he embraces manhood's "experience" — the knowledge of good and evil — is a re-enactment of the Fall.

Ah what a paradise begins with life & what
a wilderness the knowledge of the world
discloses Surely the Garden of Eden was
nothing more than our first parents entrance
upon life & the loss of it their knowledge
of the world⁴⁰

It is important, also, to note that Clare associates Eden with many things other than childhood and the unspoiled landscape. Solitude is one of them:

Creations steps ones wandering meets
Untouched by those of man
Things seem the same in such retreats
As when the world began (SPP,167)

Clare's Eden is distant from "the haunts of men" (PJC,II,224) — while others desire "tumultuous joys", Clare seeks out "The whispering voice of woods and streams / That breathe of Eden still" (PJC,I,344).⁴¹

quotations or references cited in my following discussion of the Eden theme have been used by Janet Todd in her dissertation. On the relationship between Eden and enclosure E.J. Bush notes that pre-Restoration propaganda against the enclosure system tied the idea of Old England very closely to the biblical myths of Eden and New Jerusalem (see Bush, op. cit., note 12 above, pp. 55-6).

⁴⁰ Prose (Tibble, 1951), pp. 17-18.

⁴¹ Cowper also associates solitude with Eden in his "Retirement" (1782), lines 28 and 364.

Another common association is with those "trifles" that the "heedless mind" ignores:

Some in recordless rapture love to breath [sic]
 Natures wild Eden wood and field and heath
 In common blades of grass his thoughts will raise
 A world of beauty to admire and praise
 Untill his heart oerflows with swarms of thought
 To that great being who raised life from nought ...
 (CSPP, 152)

Clare's trifles, we know, may become divine through the power of "fancy", and it is this same fancy that wakes the mind to paradise.

Fancy spreads Edens wheresoe'er they be ...
 (PJC, II, 41)

The husbandman making his way home in "The Pleasures of Spring" gazes on the moon and fancies there "a quiet resting place / Deeming it Heaven or something near akin / ... Thinking his soul shall gather wing & flye / To that pale Eden on the soft blue sky."⁴²

Similarly the poet imagines the morning wind that animates the flowers as having awakened the joy of Adam in Eden (see CSPP, 175), and hears the song of the bluecap down through the ages "Sung to Adam and to Eve — / ... The eternity of song" (JCSP, 224-5). In this scheme of things, of course, Clare's beloved comes to be identified with Eve, and two of the pre-asylum ballads, "A World for Love" (PJC, II, 76) and "The

⁴² W.K. Richmond, appendix to Poetry and the People (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947), pp. 230-42; these lines are on p. 240.

Backward Spring" (PJC,II,86), show the longing for a loved one to make his Eden flourish again, a longing which is intensified in the asylum poetry. The elusive "she" is "The flower of Eden" (LPJC,60); "Mans love" is personified as "woman with Eves mother face" (LPJC,195), inhabiting "The Eden of earth's happiness" (JCSP,283); a loved one is needed to make his Eden complete (see e.g. LPJC,256; PJCM,113).

Dr. Todd's monograph on Clare unfortunately draws a line at 1837, by which time, she writes, "Clare's treatment of the fall from Eden had apparently been worked out." (P.79). I have remarked earlier in this chapter on the dislocation which Clare experienced in 1832, the year of his leaving Helpstone for Northborough, and this dislocation seems powerful enough to Dr. Todd to rank as Clare's experience of the Fall. This Fall is registered in the three poems which lament the loss of home, of vision, of poetry, of trees and flowers "from Adams open gardens" (CSPP,206), and the poems that follow these, Dr. Todd suggests, evoke "the wintry world after the fall." (P.75). The pun is a useful one, but I believe it is misleading to characterize the poetry of the asylum years in this way, as the record of an "un-Edenic vision." (P.80). Even in one of the Northborough poems Clare welcomes back the breath of "something more than earthly bliss" — "The furze clumps in their golden flowers / Make

Edens in these golden hours" (PJC,II,261)⁴³ — and the asylum poems are not wanting in similar revivals of joy. The meadows and fens may still "Seem Eden in this sabbath rest from care" (LPJC,59), and twilight musings may yet impart tranquillity, "While earth seems Eden in such an hour" (LPJC,177). The poetry that waned at Northborough is sufficiently rekindled at Northampton for Clare to hail its "unexhausted [sic] powers", not the least of which is its power to evoke "all the gorgeous Edens upon earth" (LPJC,107). This is not to deny that Clare experienced a fall, but it is hardly sufficient to say that his treatment of the theme had been "worked out" before he entered the asylum.

This contradiction puzzles me
 And it may puzzle all
 Was Adam thus foredoomed to be
 Our misery by his fall
 Eves fall has been a fall to me
 And do the best I can
 Woman I neither love nor see
 And cannot be a man (LPJC,184)

The editors of the asylum poems have stressed Clare's continuing fascination with the Eden theme: "It is a symbolic pattern to which he continually returns in his poetry and his prose. Without examining the theme here in detail, it suffices to say that Clare

⁴³ Janet Todd notes that: "After 1824, the theme of the golden age is eclipsed in Clare's poetry" (monograph p. 27); his use of the word "golden" in this poem is evidently rare at this stage of his work.

lived with Eden always before him, a vision of perpetual freshness and innocence against which he tested, so to speak, the society in which he lived."⁴⁴ Robert Shaw endorses this with his suggestion that the asylum to Clare is "a Purgatorial Hell, symbolizing the Fall and loss of freedom, while the people and landscape of his childhood came to stand for the innocence he had lost."⁴⁵ Provided we accept Shaw's assertion as a generalization, since Clare's mourning for a lost Eden begins long before the asylum period, and since the verses of the asylum period are not entirely sombre, then there is some merit in looking at the later poems as the record of the loss of Eden. Certainly his preoccupation with childhood's innocence is unabated:

Then I played like a flower in the shade and
the sun
And slept as in Eden when daylight was done ...
(LPJC, 170)

The image of the flower typifies beauty and freedom, but also transience and frailty. Clare's response to the transience of the prelapsarian vision is articulated with a stark intensity in many of these later poems, especially in "Child Harold" and "Don Juan", where

⁴⁴ Robinson and Summerfield, introduction to LPJC, p.11.

⁴⁵ Northamptonshire Past and Present, 3, 1964, 202; Storey p. 439.

sorrow bursts out "Like Satans Warcry First In Paradise" (LPJC, 69),⁴⁶ and threatens to consume the poet utterly. That sorrow was to ease considerably during the long confinement at Northampton until Clare's death in 1864, though his reverence for the past remains the inspiration of his quest for eternity — as he realised with sudden insight in "Child Harold",

The Gates of Eden is the bounds of heaven ...
(LPJC, 77)

It would be unsatisfactory to leave the Eden theme, the climax of Clare's divinization of the past, without paying some attention to the characteristics of the Edenic landscape. I have made passing reference to Clare's willingness to discern in Nature some indications of the paradise that has been and is to come, and I shall be exploring this subject more fully in chapter four. For the rest of the present chapter I want to look at the physical features of Clare's paysage moralisé, the landscape that whispers of Eden.⁴⁷ Perhaps the

⁴⁶ Clare frequently capitalizes the initial letter of every word during this period.

⁴⁷ Thomas Frosch has argued that the tradition of the paysage moralisé is a strong influence on Clare's earlier poetry, but "the response of reading universal meanings, to a great extent, drops out in the late work" (see p. 140 of his article "The Descriptive Style of John Clare" in Studies in Romanticism, 10, 1971, 137-49). My own feeling is that Clare's moral reading of the ~~of the~~ landscape simply becomes more implicit, more taken for granted, as the strength of his conviction about the lost Eden grows.

prime characteristic of the paradisial landscape is intimated in one of the asylum poems where Clare extols "That Eden of earth's liberty" (PJCM,149), and at all stages of his work we find the love of "freedom" to be a recurring theme. To be free meant to be able to partake of the pristine wildness and beauty of Nature — as Middleton Murry has said: "Certainly, Clare loved the old open-field system most of all because it was the next best thing to leaving nature all wild. There was a stubborn core of the pure gipsy and vagabond in him. On his heart was written: The more freedom for Nature, the more freedom for me."⁴⁸ And significantly Murry has noted another application of the word: "To be with the free, evidently, also meant for Clare to be one with God, as he conceived God."⁴⁹ Other critics have also remarked on Clare's love of freedom: John Barrell associates the word with an attraction to the boundlessness and distance of the moors in contrast to the "crampt circle" of life in Helpston (e.g. CSPP, 188),⁵⁰ and Geoffrey Grigson regards it as "the

⁴⁸ J. Middleton Murry, op. cit. (see note 11 above), p.98.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁰ John Barrell, op. cit. (see note 7 above), pp. 143-4.

condition of attaining to joy and love."⁵¹ It is easy to see the value of freedom to Clare during the asylum years, and a letter from W.F. Knight, steward at Northampton Asylum, to Joseph Stenson in March 1846 records most poignantly Clare's reaction to being confined to the asylum grounds as a penalty for having drunk too much in the town.⁵² Knight gives us a sample of Clare's verse written under this penalty:

Fancy, thou burning mirror of the mind
That like the sun on Nature's memory shines
In thee, alone my free born spirit finds
'I'ts [sic] liberty, and pasture —

In such confinement Clare quite naturally turns to fancy for liberation, but in happier days freedom and peace of mind were always at hand in the wild landscape.

"Wildness" for Clare is that quality which inspires, for instance, his preference for tangled thickets rather than open plains (see e.g. "A Copse in Winter", PJC, I, 269), and is best enjoyed by the "unshackled mood" of solitude ("Pastoral Liberty", PJC, II, 305). Clare specifies the nature of his favourite retreats in a number of poems, and frequently the same qualities

⁵¹ Geoffrey Grigson, "Integrity and John Clare" in Listener, 3 Nov. 1955, 743-4.

⁵² W.F. Knight to J. Stenson, 3 March 1846, in I.M.F. Hooker and N. Dermott Hunt, eds., "John Clare: Some Unpublished Documents of the Asylum Period" in Northamptonshire Past and Present, 3, 1964, 190-8.

emerge. In apostrophizing winter he declares:
 "Your wildest horrors I the most esteem" (PJC, I, 121);
 in pursuing his extensive walks he confesses "A
 favourite love for the unsocial heath" (PJC, II, 305);
 and in seeking out the haunts of birds he welcomes "the
 desolate face / Of rude waste landscapes far away
 from men" (CSPP, 117). The same "safetys wildness"
 that protects the nests of birds (SPP, 92) affords
 sanctuary to the poet; thus we find him associating
 wildness with "Prospects of freedom" (PJC, I, 227),
 and attributing to it "the power to give my bosom rest"
 (PJC, I, 261). In "Child Harold" Clare describes a
 tremendous storm, and seems to revel in its untamed
 energy:

The thunders heavens artillery vollies bye
 Trees crash, earth trembles — beast [s]
 prepare to flye
 Almighty what a crash — yet man is free
(LPJC, 62)

A little further on in the poem he meditates on a
 "winter scene of frost and storms" and proclaims with
 a similar unexpectedness:

Bare fields the frozen lake and leafless grove
 Are natures grand religion and true love
(LPJC, 65)

Storms seem to have held a particular fascination for
 Clare, and are not necessarily hostile to his concept
 of Eden. The storms and desolation in "Child Harold"
 seem not only to bear witness to Nature's awesome power,
 but also to consume all mortal things, to make "earth
 and its delusions pass away", leaving only "the mind

as its creator free" (LPJC,42). Thomson no doubt provided a model for Clare's earliest set-pieces of storm-description, such as the "Address to Plenty" written in 1817 (see JCSP,17-18). The same genre recurs with remarkable regularity throughout Clare's career: in "Description of a Thunderstorm" (PJC,I,167), in a passage from "November" in The Shepherd's Calendar (SC,120-1), in "The Hailstorm in June 1831" (PJC,II,138), in parts of MS.110 (LPJC,110 and 122), and in stanzas 2 and 3 of "A Rhapsody" (PJCM,211-12). Thomson had especially sanctioned the poetical rights of Winter:

All nature feels the renovating force
Of Winter — only to the thoughtless eye
In ruin seen. (Seasons,IV,704-6)

And Clare concurs:

And what wild eye with nature's beauties charm'd,
That hangs enraptur'd o'er each witching spell,
Can see thee, Winter, then, and not be warm'd
To breathe thy praise, and say, 'I love thee well!'
(PJC,I,237)

The sombre hues and picturesque charm of the winter landscape are superbly evoked in Clare's long poem simply entitled "Winter" (PJC,I,357), and the same tone of wistful affection is heard in the sonnet "Wood Pictures in Winter" (CSPP,162). Even in "the bitterest day that ever blew" Clare finds things of beauty (PJC,II,310), and in its own way the starkness of winter is just as exhilarating as the gaiety of spring:

... The seasons, each as God bestows,
 Are simple and sublime.
 I love to see the snowstorm hing:
 'Tis but the winter garb of spring.
(PJCM, 150)

The same affection naturally applies to autumn, which has been recognized as the favourite season of the pre-Romantic poets.⁵³ "The Last of Autumn" (PJC, I, 353) is representative of Clare's earlier autumn poems:

Come, bleak November, in thy wildness come:
 Thy mornings clothed in rime, thy evenings chill —
 E'en these have power to tempt me from my home,
 E'en these have beauty to delight me still ...
(PJC, I, 353)

The gusty, misty, chilly days of autumn seem to suit the poet in his most solemn moods, and Thomas Frosch finds that Clare's increasing concern with autumn and wind is indicative of his confrontation with flux and loss,⁵⁴ and there are ten or more poems that bear this out. The turbulence of autumn and winter is in sympathy with Clare's own feelings — a sympathy which he had expressed during his Northborough years in "Autumn Morning" (PJC, II, 263), and which recurs in "Approach of Winter" (PJC, II, 414), written from the asylum. Such turbulence is not always hostile to the peacefulness of Eden and sometimes inspires the poet

⁵³ See Paul Van Tieghem, Le Sentiment de la Nature dans le Prérromantisme Européen (Paris: Nizet, 1960), pp. 39-49.

⁵⁴ Frosch, op. cit. (see note 47 above), 145-9.

as much as blossoms and lambs. "The Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm," said the prophet Nahum, and Clare feels His presence in "the rolling thunder and the roaring sea":

Death breathes its pleasures when it speaks of him;
 My pulse beats calmer while his lightnings play.
 My eye, with earth's delusions waxing dim,
 Clears with the brightness of eternal day.
 The elements crash round me: it is he!
 Calmly I hear his voice and never start.
 From Eve's posterity I stand quite free,
 Nor feel her curses rankle round my heart.
(JCSP, 314-15)

If the fury of the elements serves to brighten Clare's vision of eternal day, then it is likely that he will be equally inspired by mountains, precipices, cataracts, the ocean, gothic ruins, and other features sympathetic to the sensibility of the Picturesque. Despite the unspectacular nature of Clare's environment, his ideal landscape is far removed from that of the pastoral tradition, as characterized, for instance, by Thomas Burnet's second proposition: "That the face of the Earth before the Deluge was smooth, regular, and uniform; without Mountains, and without a Sea."⁵⁵ During the eighteenth century the physico-theological arguments of Keill, King and Derham began to promote mountains and torrents to a rightful place in God's garden, and the poetry of John Philips and Richard Blackmore, of Akenside and Thomson, of Collins and the Wartons bears testimony to the new reverence for

⁵⁵ Thomas Burnet, Sacred Theory of the Earth (1684 edn.) ed. Basil Willey (London: Centaur Press, 1965), p. 53.

scenes of rugged grandeur.⁵⁶ The literature of "picturesque" travel, epitomized in Gray's journals of 1739 and 1775, endorsed by Burke's treatise of 1756, and ridiculed by Combe's satire of 1809, ran parallel with the manuals of "gardenesque" design produced by Knight, Price, and Gilpin. Some of the eighteenth-century excesses had been refined by the Romantic poets, who had excesses of their own, but the taste for mountainous retreats and yawning chasms was still very much alive, and Clare was inevitably influenced by it. Clare had never seen a mountain, yet his love of wildness and freedom naturally extended, even if only through fancy, to what he calls "mountain liberty" (SC,77).

The morning falls in dizzy light
On mountain-tops and towers,
But speeds with soft and gentle flight
Among these valley-flowers. (PJC,I,429)

Clare's habitat, as we have seen, is among the valley-flowers, but this does not prevent him from casting longing glances at the dizzier lights of the distant hills:

What is there in the distant hills
My fancy longs to see
That many a mood of joy instills
Say what can fancy be (SPP,100)

In foreign lands how beautiful the sight
Over a thousand mountains of snow spray,
With nought of green but mountains pale as light
And all the way. (PJCM,145)

⁵⁶ For a brief survey of the taste for mountains see C.A. Moore, "The Return to Nature in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century" in Studies in Philology, 1917, 243-91. For a longer and more recent study see Marjorie Nicolson, Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory (second edn., New York: Norton, 1963).

It is a measure of the tendency of Clare's fancy that he should shape the clouds to "Huge seeming rocks and deserts" (PJC,I,393), that he should contemplate retirement to "caves and lonely mountains" (PJC,II,160), and that he should picture a setting sun that "tips with fire the mountain's head" (PJCM,177). Another sunset, witnessed from the asylum, "to thought recalls / Niagara's rocks and their tremendous falls" (PJCM,204), though the cataract is not without its more frightening aspects (see PJCM,172). As a child Clare was twice almost drowned in a meadow-pit,⁵⁷ and this may help to account for his reluctance to commit his taste to turbulent waters. Whether he ever saw the ocean or not is debatable,⁵⁸ but certainly he was familiar with

⁵⁷ See Prose (Tibble, 1951), pp. 14-15.

⁵⁸ J.W. and Anne Tibble write: "[Clare's] occasional and uncharacteristic evocation of the forces of cataract, mountain gulph, and sea which he never saw, is symbolic of his life's catastrophic descent." (John Clare: His Life and Poetry; London: Heinemann, 1956; p. 180.) In their revised biography (1972; see note 33 above) this is confirmed: "He did not ever see the sea" (p. 376). Frederick Martin, however, in his Life of John Clare (London: Macmillan, 1865; rpt. London: Cass, 1964, ed. E. Robinson and G. Summerfield) gives a graphic description of Clare's only sight of the ocean, on the occasion of his visit to Boston in 1828 (see pp. 229-30 of the 1964 edn.). Martin is probably basing his account on Clare's two sonnets on "Boston Church" (see PJC,II,112-13), which certainly give the impression that Clare had viewed the sea from the church spire.

Falconer's Shipwreck,⁵⁹ echoes from which are heard in the descriptions of ocean storms in two of Clare's ballads (see LPJC,150 and PJC,II,456). Clare's own life, as he came to see it, was a "vast shipwreck" (CSPP,222), and the sea is thus more often an image of destruction than an emblem of Eden.

My life is like the ocean wave,
And like the inconstant sea:
In every hope appears a grave
And leaves no hope for me. (PJC*CM*,112)

Sorrow invades his life like "Deaths Sea Bursting In The Midst Of Hope" (LPJC,69), and the final apocalypse, which Clare foretells in a number of poems, is evoked in terms of tempest and flood in which "valleys rise to mountain waves / And mountains sink to seas" (see PJC,I,399-403 and LPJC,104-5, 108-9). Nevertheless, one of his earliest poems expresses a desire to slumber on the waves, just as "upon the troubled sea, / Emblematic simile, / Birds are known to sit secure, / While the billows roar and rave" (JCSP,17), and the same idea of security in the midst of flux is suggested in "Child Harold":

Flow on my verse though barren thou mayest be
Of thought - Yet sing and let thy fancies roll
In Early days thou swept a mighty sea
All calm in troublous deeps and spurned controul
(LPJC,76)

Again in one of the asylum songs Clare yearns to be "on the wild sea shore" (LPJC,193), and in fact the wish

⁵⁹ See Robinson and Summerfield, introduction to CSPP, p. 38.

is partially granted in many ballads where his persona takes to the sea (see LPJC,258; JCSP,325; PJCM, 189-90; PJC,II,455). And if Clare was unable to visit the coast himself, he compensated in his inimitable way by bringing the ocean to Helpstone:

How beautiful the wind awakes & flings
 Disordered graces oer the face of things!
 Stirring the shorter grass in twittering gleams
 Like rippling shadows over shallow streams
 & waving that which grows more rank & high
 In deepening waves of darker majesty, —
 A green & living sea in life arayed
 Wave rolling over wave, shade chasing shade
 In every different grade of stirring hue
 More swifter than the swallow can pursue
 Who journeys low & rapid o'er the lea
 & seemly swims along the summer sea.
 The brushing billows rush o'er passing feet
 As waves are broken o'er the rocks they meet
 The woods, too, round the landscape roll, a sea
 Of varied hues & wild imensity
 Heaving fantastic on the wandering eye
 Hugh [Huge] swelling billows to the smiling sky. (60)

Clare's taste in landscape is more specifically "picturesque" in those poems where he introduces gothic ruins, exotic countries, crooked stiles in lonely lanes, and gnarled tree-trunks in ancient groves. Crumbling castles, "Where ivy scrambles up to stop the fall", and dilapidated bridges "mossy-arched" claim his affections in "The Village Minstrel" (JCSP, 48-9), and the long poem "Solitude" singles out the "mouldering walls" of abbeys and the "silent gloom" of graveyards as favourite haunts (PJC,I,195-8). "Crowland Abbey" (JCSP,138) adds a grey owl and some

⁶⁰ Richmond, op. cit. (note 42), p. 238.

rank weeds to the inventory, and one of the asylum poems specifies the latter as nettles (see LPJC, 106). The exotic strain creeps in during the later years and lures Clare's fancy as far afield as Scotland, Lapland, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Siberia, Araby, and the Dead Sea! The influence here is primarily Byron's, though Thomson is a direct source for at least one instance:

Long let us walk
Where the breeze blows from yon extended field
Of blossomed beans. Arabia cannot boast
A fuller gale of joy ... (Seasons, I,
498-501)

A beanfield full in blossom smells as sweet
As Araby, or groves of orange flowers ...
(JCSP, 309)

John Barrell, in his study of Clare's style and sources, has devoted considerable space to the history of the Picturesque,⁶¹ but is strangely reserved about placing Clare in such a context. In Clare's poetry, according to Barrell, picturesque images "never occur more than occasionally, and when they do they seem strangely separate from the rest of the poem and the images around them."⁶² Certainly what is "merely" picturesque is now looked on with disfavour, but Clare's habit of fragmenting the landscape into little pictures is, as I have shown in chapter one, a very

⁶¹ Barrell, op. cit. (note 7), pp. 50-62.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 149.

consistent one, and if a great many of these little pictures are also unashamedly picturesque, they must be accepted as part of Clare's taste. Barrell presumes that Clare had no knowledge of the Picturesque until his visit to London in the early 1820's (p. 148), but the word occurs in one of the sonnets written between 1809 and 1819 and published in 1820 (see PJC, I, 124); thereafter the word crops up, as Barrell says, "quite often". Clare also uses the words "sublime" (SPP, 136 and PJC, II, 238) and "sublimity" (LPJC, 110), "romantic" (PJC, II, 132) and "half romantic" (PJC, I, 354), "fantastic" and "grotesque" (PJC, II, 123), and as epithets belonging to such scenes as these words evoke we may note "desolate" and "neglected" (CSPP, 152), "safe" and "secluded" (PJC, II, 277), "rich" and "joyful" (PJC, II, 322). Many passages might serve to illustrate precisely what Clare means by such terms, but conveniently he has collected most of his favourite picturesque images in a little "catalogue" passage in "The Moorehen's Nest":

A gate whose posts are two old dotterel trees
 A close with molehills sprinkled oer its leas
 A little footbrig with its crossing rail
 A wood gap stopt with ivy wreathing pale
 A crooked stile each path crossed spinney owns
 A brooklet forded by its stepping stones
 A wood bank mined with rabbit holes — and then
 An old oak leaning oer a badgers den
 Whose cave mouth enters neath the twisted charms
 Of its old roots and keeps it safe from harms ...
 (SPP, 81)

In gathering together the characteristics of Clare's

ideal landscape I have been emphasising the relationship between "wildness" and "freedom", and have instanced stormy weather, mountains, the ocean, ruins, and objects of picturesque decay as being necessary to Clare's total concept of Eden. My emphasis on these features has been deliberate, and my purpose has been to counterbalance the general view of Clare as a poet of sunny fields and gentle streams. E.P. Hood, for example, wrote in 1851: "All [Clare's] images are simple, natural, and affecting; he never selects images he has not seen: perhaps, the words mountain and forest do not occur throughout his poems."⁶³ And as recently as 1973 Janet Todd has cited Clare's Essay on Landscape as final proof of his un-Romantic taste.⁶⁴ Certainly the majority of Clare's poems may evoke scenes that are homely, rustic, and what one

⁶³ E.P. Hood, The Literature of Labour (London: Partridge, 1851), pp. 128-64; Storey p. 263.

⁶⁴ See Todd, op. cit. (note 37; monograph), pp. 44-5. In her dissertation Dr. Todd acknowledges Clare's fascination with wild and stormy Nature, but argues that the destructiveness of untamed Nature contrasts with the poet's (and God's) serenity. "Evil may cause the blight and crushing storm / His is the sunny glory and the calm" (LPJC, 36) (see diss. pp. 142 and 192-3). This is certainly the case in some poems, but it is equally true that wild Nature offers the poet a sympathetic mood and an emotional release; cf. Byron's Childe Harold, III, st. 13, 75, and 92-7.

reviewer described in 1821 as "unpicturesque",⁶⁵ but to ignore the more tempestuous images of his poetry is to miss the full range of his aesthetic and temperamental sympathies. Clare's references to wild, uncultivated, untamed Nature are too frequent and too spontaneous to be dismissed as entirely imitative, even if the evidence of his life suggests that such space "that a Man views around his dwelling-place," as Blake said, "Standing on his own roof, or in his garden on a mount / Of twenty-five cubits in height" (Milton, plate 29, 5-7), was the limit of Clare's daily experience. Nevertheless, as I observed at the beginning of this chapter, Clare is a deceptively "simple" poet, and the casual reader who comes across his sonnet to De Wint, in which "the rich sublime" of sky and mountains is decried in comparison with "level pastures" and "rushy flats" (JCSP, 137), may be forgiven for taking him strictly at his word. If the same reader also discovers that Clare's joy is in "the thunder-melting clouds, / The snow-capt mountain, and the rolling sea" (JCSP, 314), he is likely to be confused. It would be an oversimplification to assert that the first is the real, the second the imitative voice, since the former sentiments are partly a polite compliment to De Wint, and also show the influence, as Ian

⁶⁵ Literary Gazette, 6 Oct. 1821, 625-8; Storey p. 143. The reviewer is actually referring to Clare's song "Swamps of wild rush-beds" (JCSP, 62), which is partly a parody of Byron's "Lachin Y Gair" (1807) and therefore deliberately "unpicturesque".

Jack has noted, of Bloomfield:⁶⁶

No Alpine wonders thunder through my verse,
The roaring cataract, the snow-topt hill,
Inspiring awe, till breath itself stands still:
Nature's sublimer scenes ne'er charm'd mine eyes ...
(Farmer's Boy, I, 8-11)

And heath and pastures, hedgerow-stunted tree,
Are more than Alps with all its hills to me ...
(PJC, II, 308)

Nor is it merely a question of the chronological development of Clare's taste, since the asylum poems may display the same reservations about wildness and desolation as the earlier pieces,⁶⁷ while the latter are by no means devoid of the rugged landscape which was to fascinate the poet more and more in his confinement. Clare never seems to have quite made up his mind even about his order of preference for individual seasons. He admits "A preference to Spring" (PJC, I, 351), but then autumn is "the dull season the sweetest of any" (LPJC, 220). In comparison with "garish summer", spring is "The sweetest poesy of the year" (PJC, II, 437), but elsewhere summer discloses the greatest beauties (see LPJC, 270, 271, 275-6). Summer is also described as "a dirty hussey Swarming o'er wi wasps and

⁶⁶ See Ian Jack, "Poems of John Clare's Sanity" in Some British Romantics (Ohio State University Press, 1966), p. 223. Clare's three sonnets to Bloomfield are printed by D.B. Green in Review of English Literature, Apr. 1966, 95-6.

⁶⁷ Cf. PJC, I, 32; JCSP, 185; PJC, II, 288; PJC, II, 356-8; JCSP, 307.

flies" (LPJC,205), while winter, for all its sombre charms in the poems which I cited earlier, is also a "miser" (PJC,II,298) by whose agency "Nature's all withered to the root" (LPJC,221). Just as all kinds of landscape have their attractions and their limitations, so the four seasons all have their special appeal —

There is a charm in Nature felt and seen
In every season of the varied year ... (PJCM,145)

It would seem most likely that the vacillation of Clare's emotional moods is the index to his attraction to a variety of scenes and seasons at different times, making it hazardous to generalize about his concept of Eden's terrain. W.F. Knight, in the letter to Stenson quoted earlier, gives us one brief glimpse of Clare's state of mind in the asylum: "John keeps jogging on from theme to theme — from passion to calm nature — from solitude to bustling life."⁶⁸ The fact that Clare can waver in his devotion to solitude may deprive this particular preoccupation of its almost mythic status in Clare's thought, but at the same time it makes of him a more attractive personality. At times, like all of us, Clare knows the gloominess and fearfulness of being alone, as the sonnet "Life in Lone Places" (PJC,II,122) reveals. There is but a thin line, after all, between solitude and loneliness, and it is

⁶⁸ Knight to Stenson, 3 March 1846, in Hooker and Hunt, op. cit. (note 52), p. 192.

the latter condition that seems to urge some of the most wretched cries from the asylum:

I feel I am, I only know I am
And plod upon the earth as dull and void
Earth's prison chilled my body with its dram
Of dullness, and my soaring thoughts destroyed.
I fled to solitudes from passions dream
But strife persued — I only know I am. (CSPP,222)

Clare was well acquainted with the "sweet society in fields and woods" (PJCM,212), but he could not forever shun the society of men. On occasions he may even prefer to take his walk along "the social way" (CSPP, 174), and he is far from being averse to "sweet domestic peace" (PJC,II,329). "January" from The Shepherd's Calendar contains a delightful account of home fellowship (see SC,8-12), and the same conviviality animates his later piece "A Fireside Sketch" (PJC,II,288). In fact, he has even been so perverse as to admit human company into his Eden:

Oh, where we find this social joy and mirth,
There we may truly say that heaven exists on earth.
(PJC,I,203)

However much Clare may have yearned for wild solitudes, there was little chance of escape from the intercourse of the village, and the daily lives of the peasant labourers provide much of his poetical fare. Charges of putting natural history before natural affections, however, have not been wanting. As early as 1824 James Hessey was remonstrating with him about his lack of attention to "Life and human Feelings",⁶⁹ and George

⁶⁹ Hessey to Clare, 3 Nov. 1824, in Storey pp. 194-5.

Darley urged him in 1829 to garnish his landscapes with "live-bait".⁷⁰ This kind of persuasion was later to achieve the dignity of an artistic principle, gaining support from even such an unlikely source as John Ruskin: "Only natural phenomena in their direct relation to humanity — these are to be your subjects in landscape. Rocks and water and air may no more be painted for their own sakes, than the armour carved without the warrior."⁷¹ Perhaps the most comprehensive statement of this argument has been made by Stopford Brooke:

There are two great subjects of poetry; the natural world ... and human nature. When poetry is best, most healthy, most herself, she mingles together human nature and Nature, and the love of each. Human nature is first in poetry and Nature second but they must be together, if the poetry is to be great and passionate, simple and perceptive, imaginative and tender. It is a terrible business for poetry when it is wholly employed on man, or wholly employed on Nature. In either case the poetry becomes thin, feeble, unimaginative, incapable of giving impulse or bringing comfort.⁷²

For all its dogmatism there is some truth in this creed, but one wonders at the practicability of its application. Wordsworth, for instance, whose

⁷⁰ Darley to Clare, 14 March 1829, in Storey pp. 213-14.

⁷¹ John Ruskin, Lectures on Landscape (1871), lecture 1, para. 9, in E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds., The Works of John Ruskin (London: George Allen, 1906), vol. XXII, p. 17.

⁷² Stopford A. Brooke, Naturalism in English Poetry (London: Dent, 1920), p. 27.

knowledge of Nature compared to Clare's was "cursory", to use Robert Graves's word,⁷³ and whose compensatory knowledge of Man was presumably thorough, might seem to be the prime example of a poet who has mixed the two ingredients of his fare in the right proportions, and Russell Noyes has characterized the highest level of Wordsworth's achievement as being concerned with "Scenes in which the landscape acts upon Man so that the human interest is central."⁷⁴ Among Noyes's examples of this achievement are "Michael" and the sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge", but in the first we read of Wordsworth's interest in human nature in these terms:

It was the first
Of those domestic tales that spake to me
Of Shepherds, dwellers in the valleys, men
Whom I already loved; — not verily
For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills
Where was their occupation and abode ...
("Michael", 21-6)

and in the second, despite Noyes's avowal of Wordsworth's "awareness of the human life in the city" (p. 241), the only people in the poem are fast asleep. One cannot deny Wordsworth's sympathy with a great variety of people, but it is the love of Nature which comes first, and the love of Man may or may not follow as

⁷³ Robert Graves, The Crowning Privilege (London: Cassell, 1955), p. 51.

⁷⁴ See Russell Noyes, Wordsworth and the Art of Landscape (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 232-50.

a matter of course.⁷⁵ In Clare's experience it did not necessarily follow at all.

It is no defence of Clare's apparently antisocial attitudes to suggest that Wordsworth was no less introverted, but I would be reluctant to reach the same conclusion as Kenneth Richmond: "Nature is all very fine but human nature is finer, as Keats very rightly realized. The more Clare took refuge in the country the more was he forced into a position of isolation from society — the distant, disgruntled spectator. When every prospect pleases and only Man is vile, what other home is there for the poet if not in Bedlam?"⁷⁶ Leaving aside the question of whether or not Keats was right, I would simply take issue with the over-simplification that Clare's hatred of mankind caused him to go insane — as I have noted in chapter two, Clare's attitude towards Man is far too realistically equivocal for him to commit his judgement once and for all. Moreover, of all Clare's poems that may loosely be called "nature poems" (offering some description of aspects of the landscape), approximately 260 include human figures, compared with some 180 unpeopled poems. By my count, there are over

⁷⁵ Basil Willey writes: "Wordsworth, we know, also taught that love of [Nature] leads on to love of Man. I venture to doubt the truth of this ... " (The Religion of Nature; London: Lindsey Press, 1957; p. 27.) Wordsworth's assertion that the mind of man is "A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells" (Prelude, XIV, 449-50) must also be read with reservations.

⁷⁶ Richmond, op. cit. (note 42), p. 180; Storey p. 403.

eighty different occupations depicted in Clare's published works,⁷⁷ and it is by no means far-fetched to suggest, as John Barrell has done, that in a basically feudal society human nature may be presented as "a function of what people do."⁷⁸ Nor should we forget the superb "Village Tales" that Clare composed as tragi-comic narratives of rural love and adventure. Clare's Eden may have been closed to the greedy, the arrogant, the petty, the cruel, and even the indifferent, but it was not so restricted as to debar entire mankind.

Having suggested some of the ambiguities of Clare's attitudes, I want finally in this chapter to stress that Clare's ideal landscape, unadorned and unspoiled, has a significance for him which may rightly be termed "divine". I have been making frequent use of the word "taste" as an aesthetic standard for admiring Nature, and it is a word that Clare himself has sanctioned. Such is the quality of vision of the Man of Taste, Clare tells us, that he is granted "a look in Heaven before its time".⁷⁹ It is "rich instinct's

⁷⁷ As a sample I offer the following: angler, barkman, birdboy, courser, cowboy, ditcher, fisher, fowler, haymaker, hedger, herdboy, huntsman, milkmaid, miller, mole-catcher, mower, packman, pinder, ploughman, poacher, reaper, seedsman, shepherd, sower, sticker, thatcher, thresher, waggoner, weeder, woodman.

⁷⁸ Barrell, op. cit. (note 7), p. 172.

⁷⁹ From "The Pleasures of Spring" in Richmond, op. cit. (note 42), p. 237.

natural taste" that guides creatures as humble as the mole, the moorhen, and the yellow-hammer in choosing for themselves a "picturesque" home (see PJC,II,136; SPP,80; CSPP,148). T.P. Harrison has observed:

"In what Darwin was to call natural selection Clare finds 'taste', the miracle which guides each bird in the laws of its kind."⁸⁰ And if wild thorns and brambles are good enough for Nature's taste, they are good enough for Clare's (see PJC,II,327). According to this aesthetic, any excessive cultivation is an invasion of the natural order, and it is not by chance that Clare should apply the adjective "tasteless" to the perpetrators of enclosure (JCSP,50). As for cities, they were the final outrage!⁸¹

From all the indications that Clare has given us in his poems, no aspect of his taste emerges more strongly than his preference for Nature uncultivated and unadorned. A determining influence seems to have been his early experience as a gardener at Burghley Park, the estate of the Marquis of Exeter which had been landscaped by "Capability" Brown in the 1750's. In his autobiographical sketches of 1821 Clare records his boredom with "the continued sameness of a garden", and his delight at the termination of his temporary

⁸⁰ T.P. Harrison, Birds in the Poetry of John Clare (Peterborough Museum Society, 1957), p.4.

⁸¹ See e.g. PJC,I,246; PJC,II,131; PJCM,61.

apprenticeship.⁸² A poem written at the same time as these sketches deplores the level lawns and hedges "Which the gard'ner weekly trims" and extols instead the "shaggy borders" and "rut-gull'd lanes" of the countryside (PJC, I, 175). The traditional concept of "paradise" may have been that of "a walled enclosure",⁸³ but for Clare it is quite the opposite. Clare's refuge is in "glad neglected pastures" (PJC, II, 147), in which he delights "More even than in gardens" (PJC, II, 325). Gardens are associated first with enclosure, which necessitates restriction of freedom — "little parcels little minds to please" (CSPP, 189) — and secondly with cultivation, which is a disruption of primeval order.⁸⁴ The finest flowers are those that shun "the scene which culture's toil devours" (PJC, I, 525), and even weeds, by this standard, may attain "perfection" (LPJC, 264). Scythes and

⁸² Sketches (Blunden, 1931; see note 19 above), p. 61.

⁸³ The derivation of "paradise" is the Old Persian word pairidaēza ("walled garden"). For a brief discussion of the word see Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art (London: John Murray, 1949), p. 4.

⁸⁴ E.J. Bush remarks that enclosure "is not merely unwise or unesthetic. It is sacrilegious. ... When a man encloses a wild field he secularizes it." (Bush, op. cit., note 12 above, p. 204).

ploughshares are instruments of desecration, trimming and regimenting the landscape into an artificial order, disciplining its "wild and beautiful neglect" (PJC, II, 326).⁸⁵

I have used the phrases "natural order" and "artificial order": Clare's term for the first state is, idiosyncratically, the word "disorder". Out of the wildness and formlessness of the untouched landscape, the "maiden soil" (SPP, 166), Clare has created, as John Barrell says, "a whole aesthetic of disorder."⁸⁶ The shadows of the sycamore branches fall in "sweet disorder" (PJC, II, 132), and blossomed beans trail over the path in "rich disorder" (CSPP, 182).⁸⁷ The whole

⁸⁵ As may be expected, even in his aversion to "adorned" Nature Clare is capable of slight contradictions. A notable example is his attitude to gravel walks, which is sometimes disapproving (see CSPP, 153 and 204), sometimes favourable (see JCSP, 160; PJC, II, 310 and 316; LPJC, 102 and 108 — though in this last example the walks are "overgrown"). He also uses the word "gravel" impartially (see LPJC, 200 and 240). His attitude compares with Bloomfield's: such adornments can be attractive, but they hardly compare with Nature's uncultivated scenes (see The Banks of the Wye, II, 203-6).

⁸⁶ Barrell, op. cit. (note 7), p. 152.

⁸⁷ Clare's terminology is not completely consistent — or else it is deliberately paradoxical. The heath, for instance, in contrast to gardens with their "shaven grass and many a border", is hailed as exhibiting "a richer order" (CSPP, 205); and the plough is described at one point as an instrument "that comes to dissaray [sic]" (SPP, 80).

tendency of Clare's taste in landscape and his relationship with the natural world seems to be summed up in the phrase which he used to capture the fitful moods of autumn: "Disorderly divine" (SPP,137). The adjective "divine" is not one that Clare has scattered liberally through his verse — he uses it no more than a dozen times⁸⁸ — and I believe he applies the word in a properly religious sense. Just as his overwhelming nostalgia for a vanished way of life, free from social injustice, undisturbed by environmental change, and animated by the wonder of the childhood vision, is crystallized in the myth of Eden, so his response to the untouched landscape is to reverence it as a vestige of God's intended paradise, and as such as a foretaste of the eternity that will give permanence to the past. An examination of the mental process of divinization by which Clare has elevated Nature to these paradisiacal heights will occupy my next chapter.

⁸⁸ The adjective "divine" is subject to loss of intensity as a "picturesque" epithet. Clare's use of the word is sparing in comparison with, say, the more than one hundred instances in Wordsworth.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DIVINIZATION OF NATURE

"The voice of nature as the voice of God
Appeals to me in every tree and flower"
(JCSP, 185)

Because Clare divinizes the past, as I have shown in chapter three, his poetry has been instanced by H.N. Fairchild as indicative of the "shrinking retreatism" typical of the "weaklings" of the Romantic Movement, in contrast to the "boldly mystical affirmations" of giants like Blake,¹ and this kind of stricture seems to have found favour in recent years. "Clare's vision," writes E.J. Bush, "was essentially escapist and evasive."² His tragedy lies "in moving backwards, as Blake, a poet in many ways similar, knew one could not do and survive."³ L.J. Masson lends support with his conclusion that: "The weakness of [Clare's] philosophy rests on its escapism, and it was an escape that was not finally adequate."⁴ Clare's decline into madness seems to bear this out, but how much

¹ H.N. Fairchild, The Romantic Quest (Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 119.

² E.J. Bush, "The Poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 32 (1971), 3295A (Wisconsin); microfilm p. 345.

³ *ibid*, p. 64.

⁴ L.J. Masson, "The Fearful Vision: the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 279A (Syracuse); microfilm pp. 85-6.

more durable were the "boldly mystical affirmations" of his contemporaries? According to Kenneth Richmond, the "shining lights" of Romanticism (Beckford, Blake, Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, Byron) enjoyed but a brief "celluloid brilliance", while the self-effacing "plodders" (Crabbe, Burns, Wordsworth, Clare) are ultimately more satisfying. Whereas the latter are "positive" in their beliefs, the former are constantly burdened by a sense of "vast unfulfilment" — and "that way madness lies."⁵ With Fairchild reproving Clare, Richmond condemning Blake, and Bush protesting that the two are "in many ways similar", we seem to have reached an impasse which demands an attempt at negotiation. Fairchild, in fact, has modified his position in his volume on "Romantic Faith" in Religious Trends in English Poetry, in which he concludes: "Whatever a romantic poet appears to be devoted to, closer examination reveals that his worship curves backward upon himself."⁶ Clare's relative freedom from egotism is a point in his favour, and I want to demonstrate in this chapter that his religious convictions are not unworthy of serious discussion.

Many critics besides Fairchild have written books on the poetry of religious vision, but even so fine a work as

⁵ W.K. Richmond, Poetry and the People (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947), pp. 140-3.

⁶ H.N. Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, vol. III (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 511.

James Benziger's Images of Eternity⁷ has managed to overlook Clare's contribution. The usual preconceptions about the characteristics of the peasant — objectivity, fatalism, an instinctive grasp of universals, vigorous language, seriousness, intensity of a narrow range of experience, lack of imagination (to give Kennneth Richmond's list⁸) — have probably forestalled much further investigation into Clare's work. One anonymous reviewer of the poet's autobiographical sketches confidently summed him up as being of "an extremely ingenuous character, politically unintelligent, somewhat abject in a social sense and generally very like a quiet farm-worker except for the gift of poetry ..."⁹ Another reviewer concurred: "A quiet, good-living man, a lukewarm churchman and never a radical, peaceful and poor, with few conceits, Clare was a man of much loyalty and courage."¹⁰ Perhaps in 1931.

⁷ James Benziger, Images of Eternity: Studies in the Poetry of Religious Vision from Wordsworth to T.S. Eliot (revised edn., Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968).

⁸ See Richmond, op. cit. (note 5 above), pp. 14-18.

⁹ Spectator, 28 Mar. 1931, 522.

¹⁰ Mercury, Aug. 1931, 378.

such naivety might be forgiven, but by 1954 Rayner Unwin should have known better than to write: "Clare's Christianity was the orthodoxy of a labourer."¹¹ By 1954 a reader would have had access to the bulk of the poems, letters, and prose writings, not to mention the Tibble biography, and could have modified the picture which Clare paints of himself in the autobiographical sketches as a staunch Anglican, hostile to "the 'free will' of ranters, 'new light' of Methodists and 'Election Lottery' of Calvinism."¹² Certainly Clare kept up a flirtation with orthodoxy in the years following 1821, but his writings never quite convince us of a complete acceptance of the established faith. He is impressed by the charity and self-sacrifice of some of the clergy;¹³ he is edified by holy scripture, which contains "the best poetry & the best morality in the world" and exhibits "sacred design";¹⁴ he is attentive to the writings of Christian apologists

¹¹ Rayner Unwin, The Rural Muse (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. 124.

¹² Edmund Blunden, ed., Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), p.88. Cf. Gilchrist's account of Clare in the London Magazine, Jan. 1820, 7-11; Storey p. 41.

¹³ See e.g. J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Letters of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 105 and a passage from "The Parish" (JCSP, 158-60).

¹⁴ J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Prose of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), pp. 105 and 109.

like Addison, Blair, Boyle, Felltham, Porteus, Melmoth, and Erskine,¹⁵ the last of whom, with his Remarks on the Internal Evidence for the Truth of Revealed Religion, might easily persuade a reasoning Deist "to be half a Christian", and in time "a whole one."¹⁶ Over the years Clare fluctuates between optimism and pessimism, faith and doubt, and the conflict is intensified in the asylum period, when he wavers, as Elaine Feinstein has said, between "a calm acceptance of God's power" and a bitterness which "comes close to blaming God for his imprisonment in the madhouse he felt as hell on earth."¹⁷ One of the asylum inmates records that Clare was not "a particularly religious man", nor did he ever attain "to any degree of ripeness of Christian character."¹⁸ If Clare is confirmed in anything it is in his hatred of sectarian squabbling, of clerical hypocrisy, and of egocentric pride, and the majority of his comments on religion take the form of vigorous denunciations of bigotry. The Tibbles comment: "Clare did not know in theological detail what he believed.

¹⁵ For Clare's reading see David Powell, "John Clare's Library" in The John Clare Collection in Northampton Public Library (Northampton Public Library, 1964), pp. 23-34; and Library World, May 1964, 362-3.

¹⁶ Prose (Tibbles, 1951), p. 113.

¹⁷ Elaine Feinstein, introduction to John Clare: Selected Poems (London: University Tutorial Press, 1968), p. 20.

¹⁸ "Poet in Bondage" in Times Literary Supplement, 27 Dec. 1941, 657.

To the end he did not succeed in building any body of belief for himself. He knew better what he did not believe."¹⁹

Although Clare was at various times vaguely sympathetic to the Church of England, to Catholic Emancipation, to the Ranters, to the Unitarians, and to the Quakers, he refused to commit himself to any particular creed.²⁰ His early poems at times speak piously of the "light and inspiration" of the Gospel (PJC, I, 121), and note with approval that rustic folk will turn to "The Bible's comforts in the hour of need" (PJC, I, 469). Like Burns he admires the simple piety of the peasantry:

Religion never more calm beauty wears
Than when each cottage joins in Sunday prayers;
The poor man in his ignorance of ill
His Bible reads with unpretending skill. (PJC, I, 532)

Even in his early verses, however, there are hints of other paths to God than the holy scriptures. His portrait of "the godly man" in the poem "Sunday" points to the kind of awareness of God that Clare was beginning to discover for himself:

And oft he takes his family abroad
In short excursions o'er the field and plain,
Marking each little object on his road,
An insect, sprig of grass, and ear of grain;
Endeavouring thus most simply to maintain
That the same Power that bids the mite to crawl,
That browns the wheat-lands with their summer-stain,
That Power which form'd the simple flower withal,
Form'd all that lives and grows upon this earthly ball.
(PJC, I, 189)

¹⁹ J.W. and Anne Tibble, John Clare: His Life and Poetry (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 125.

²⁰ See J.W. and Anne Tibble, John Clare, A Life (second edn., London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 278.

Clare's turning to Nature for religious sustenance seems to have been a reaction against the dogma and the abuses of the established churches. The Roman Catholics were deluded by "sacred humbugs which their religion hurds up & sanctifys";²¹ the Methodists were vitiated by narrow-minded fanatics — "some of them will not read a book, that has not the words Lord and God in it";²² the Calvinists were "pious maniacs", infatuated with the self-importance of "A chosen race";²³ and the Anglicans were ill-served by preachers who decried reform, by curates who passed their time in partridge-shooting, and by priests who stood aloof from paupers.²⁴ To the end of his days Clare remained disgusted with the penny-pinching, soul-saving, once-a-week "religion" of the institutionalized church (see e.g. JCSP, 312-13), with its unholy trinity of "Cant

²¹ Prose (Tibble, 1951), p. 149.

²² Sketches (see note 12 above), p. 58. In a letter to Taylor of August 1824 Clare remarks that the lower classes of dissenters have produced many "deceitful & in fact dangerous characters especially amongst the methodists with whom I have declined to associate but there are a many sincere good ones to make up." Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 159.

²³ See lines 365-390 of "The Parish" in Feinstein's text (see note 17 above), p. 56.

²⁴ See pp. 64-8 of Feinstein's text of "The Parish".

humbug & hypocrisy",²⁵ but this disgust is indicative of his search for a sincere and personal relationship with God rather than of abandonment of religion altogether. In default of any fulfilment through the orthodox channels, Clare quite naturally evolved a faith that depended more on Nature than on doctrine, and I do not concede that his solution is any less valid than the elaborate mythology of Blake. To use Clare's own words: "My creed may be different from other creeds but the difference is nothing when the end is the same."²⁶

The logical starting-point for discussion of the divinization of Nature is the idea of God as Creator. God is the author of all life, and the whole of creation in some measure reflects His power and glory. This is perfectly orthodox teaching, but Clare proclaims it to the belittlement of Man's pride:

I have read the first chapter of Genesis the beginning of which is very fine but the sacred historian took a great deal upon credit for this world when he imagines that God created the sun moon & stars those mysterious hosts of heaven for no other purpose than its use 'the greater light to rule the day & the lesser light to rule the night' and the stars also 'to give light upon the earth' it is a harmless and universal propensity to magnify consequences that appertain to ourselves²⁷

²⁵ Prose (Tibble, 1951), p. 229. Cf. Keats's remarks on "the pious frauds of Religion" in his letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 Feb. - 3 May 1819, in H.E. Rollins, ed., The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821 (Cambridge University Press, 1958), vol. II, p.80.

²⁶ Prose (Tibble, 1951), p. 220.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 105.

The scope and purpose of God's Creation cannot be comprehended by the human mind, which is all too fond of making God "after man's image".²⁸ Clare, like Hopkins, has a wonderful sense of the grandeur of God, and yet, again like Hopkins, he knows the beauty of the Lord by "trifles" like the bluebell. God the Creator, "that great being who raised life from nought" (CSPP,152), is invoked by Clare as a "power divine" (PJC,I,77; SPP,71), a "superior power" (SPP,112), a "mighty power" (SPP,168), an "Almighty Power" (PJC,I,168), an "Immortal Mind" (PJC,I,272). God it is "who moves this ball" (JCSP,10) and who initiates the chain of being (see PJC,I,21-2), but Clare does not stop at deism. "There are some view the world as a lightly thrown ball," he writes (PJC,II,90), but his own world is one which continues to manifest its Creator: He nourishes the daisy and "suffers it to blow" (PJC,I,267); He "blesses earth / ... And decorates the fields" (PJC,II, 284); He looks with mercy on the world, "and bids it flourish still" (PJC,II,104).

One of the images which Clare uses most consistently to suggest the creative power of God is the image of the Divine Painter. In chapter one I illustrated Clare's habit of dividing the landscape into "little pictures", and it is not too fanciful to suggest that the painter of these

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 227.

pictures is God Himself.²⁹ Sometimes Clare uses the word "painted" to suggest artificiality, as in "art's vain painted scenes" (PJC, I, 528) or "Mere painted beauty" (LPJC, 40), but much more frequently it is applied to the splendour of clouds (e.g. PJC, I, 235), woods (e.g. PJC, I, 526), and birds (e.g. PJCM, 59). Clare admires the stormy purple sky, where "Heaven paints its wild irregularity" (SC, 119), and is both pleased and instructed by the beauty of a common flower, "Pencilled with hues of workmanship divine" (PJC, II, 143). The Painter has used his palette liberally, and Clare delights in identifying the various colours with which the landscape is "stained": there is "russet stain" (PJC, I, 22), "purple stain" (PJC, I, 269), "green" (PJC, I, 273), "black" (PJC, I, 455), "gold" (PJC, II, 148), "brown" (PJC, II, 150), "white" (CSPP, 183), and "pinky" (LPJC, 128) — this fascination with the artist's colours shows itself again and again.³⁰

²⁹ Perhaps the most eloquent exponent of this metaphor is Joshua Sylvester in his Divine Weekes and Works:
 And God Almighty rightly did Ordain
 One all Divine, one Heav'nly, one Terrene;
 Decking with Vertues one, with Stars another,
 With Flowrs, & Fruits, & Beasts, & Birds, the other:
 And plaid the Painter, when he did so gild
 The turning globes, blew'd seas, & green'd the
 field ...
 ("The Magnificence", 1170-5)

³⁰ By my count Clare uses the words "paint(ed)" and "stain(ed)" more than thirty times each in his poetry. It is worth noting here that Clare has many favourite words and phrases which frequently recur, sometimes within the one poem. A reviewer of The Shepherd's Calendar in the London Weekly Review, 9 June 1827, 7, censured Clare for his (Keatsian) habit of repeating words within the same line or adjacent lines (see Storey p. 207), but Donald Davie considers this to be

But if God is the Creator, the "Painter" and "Stainer", he is also the Sustainer, and here, as I have suggested, Clare parts company with the deists and evolves his own awareness of the abiding presence of God in animate and sentient Nature.

Clare's way of establishing that Nature is sentient, and therefore capable of expressing God, is to link it with human emotions by suggesting a comparison between his own lot and that of some bird, beast, or plant. The unsigned article in the Quarterly Review of May 1820, which seems to have been written by Gilchrist and Gifford, noted with approval that to Clare "the falling leaves become admonishers and friends, the idlest weed has its resemblance in his own lowly lot, and the opening primrose of spring suggests the promise that his own long winter of neglect and obscurity will yet be succeeded by a

a virtue (see New Statesman, 19 June 1964, 964; Storey p. 441). Often he simply uses an adjective twice, as when describing the "thunder's grave black vest, / Like black deep waters . . ." (PJC, I, 235). Occasionally a favourite metaphor may crop up repeatedly, like the "spider-web" or "cobweb" of flattery and vanity (see PJC, II, 114, 116, 117). And sometimes a whole line is transplanted, as with "That love adores and language cannot tell" in "The Memory of Love" (PJC, I, 484) and "Going to the Fair" (PJC, I, 502). A particularly striking example of repetition is the sonnet "A Hill-Side House" (PJC, II, 359), to which Alan Porter drew attention (see Spectator, 23 Aug. 1924, 260-1): here the word "seem(s)" is used seven times and the word "look(ing)" three times. Another such sonnet is "Winter Weather" (PJC, II, 367), where the warming of hands is described four times. Porter describes the habit as "a naïveté of phrasing, a sort of lisp in sense, that is pleasing from its quaintness", but in the case of "painted" and "stain" there is a consistency of usage which seems to warrant the kind of added significance which I have suggested.

summer's sun of happier fortune,"³¹ but modern taste has become suspicious of poetry that has a palpable design upon us, in which "the landscape becomes a theatre where the poet's own moral reflections are acted out."³² Some have tried to excuse Clare by denying that he draws any analogies from Nature at all — "his approach to nature is not deliberate nor in any way philosophical"³³ — while others have recognized that he is not entirely objective, and that in reading his verse "we are aware of personal feeling below its surface."³⁴ Geoffrey Grigson acknowledges that Clare "projected his own sense of happiness and love into an unremarkable landscape,"³⁵ and James Reeves adds to this that: "When Clare writes from his sympathy with small and helpless creatures, he is really

³¹ Quarterly Review, May 1820, 166-74; Storey p.98.

³² John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840 (Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 35. Cf. Coleridge's complaint that Bowles could not describe "any interesting appearance in nature, without connecting it by dim analogies with the moral world." Coleridge to Sotheby, 10 Sept. 1802 in E.L. Griggs, ed., Collected Letters of S.T. Coleridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), vol. II, p. 864.

³³ H.J. Massingham in Athenaeum, 7 Jan. 1921, 9-10; Storey p. 328.

³⁴ C. Day Lewis, The Lyric Impulse (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 113.

³⁵ Geoffrey Grigson, introduction to Selected Poems of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 10; Storey p. 406.

thinking of himself," though he goes on to note that this imaginative identification is "unconscious".³⁶ We must look at the evidence of the poems.

It seems to me that Clare uses both direct comparison and implied association to create empathy between himself and Nature. The lark enduring the rigours of winter, for instance, suggests a very bold parallel: "Thy case, with mine I sympathize it" (PJC, I, 26); whereas the sand-martin circling above the heath lends itself only vaguely to an emotional analogy, and prompts "a feeling that I cant describe / Of lone seclusion and a hermit joy" (CSPP, 117). The difference of emphasis is partly due to the progression from early to late, as Clare becomes less deliberate in his methods. In the early poems the little sparrows are "Doom'd, like to me, want's keener frost to know" (JCSP, 3), the robin's song "is like my sigh" (PJC, I, 284), and the snipe's tranquillity "teaches me / Right feelings to employ" (SPP, 72). In one of the asylum poems the grounds for the comparison are established more carefully, and so the comparison itself, when it comes, is delicate enough to seem almost incidental:

How hot the sun rushes
Like fire in the bushes
The wild flowers look sick at the foot of the tree
Birds nests are left lonely
The pewit sings only
And all seems disheartened, and lonely like me
(LPJC, 180)

³⁶ James Reeves, introduction to Selected Poems of John Clare (London: Heinemann, 1954), p. xx.

Clare's empathy is not confined to birds. Flowers also "tell their tales of joy and grief, / And think and feel with me" (PJC, I, 447): the poet may feel as "feeble" and "helpless" as the pea-blossom (SPP, 124), or may attend the message of the daisy and the primrose as they whisper "Of what they felt and I did feel" (PJC, II, 66). In "loneliness of mood" even a clump of fern "doth bequeath / Like feelings" (PJC, II, 305). Again in a later poem his comparison becomes less laboured and more suggestive:

Love is in early showers
Fast falling from above
We look on Spring's first flowers
We think of those we love ... (37)

Trees naturally suggest longevity and stability which may cruelly be sacrificed to the axe, and so Clare sees in a fallen elm "a picture which thy fate displays" and learns "a lesson from thy destiny" (PJC, II, 19). Falling leaves suggest the passing of "hopes and pleasures" (PJC, I, 242) —

for every leaf that meets the breeze
may useful lessons give
The falling leaves & fading trees
will teach us how to live (38)

Clare's "parables" are seldom as obvious as this, though naturally he goes to the ant and shapes "their dark employs / To his own visionary joys" (SC, 132), and observes of insects generally that "in their joys his own are met"

³⁷ A.J.V. Chapple, "Some Unpublished Poetical Manuscripts of John Clare" in Yale University Library Gazette, July 1956, 34-48; this stanza is on p. 42.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 44.

(PJC, I, 430) — "Like them I'll live my happy hour / A life of sunshine, bright, and brief" (LPJC, 251). He is more successful when he begins to use elements of the landscape as objective correlatives, as when winter strips the bushes of their foliage in a song which laments the withering of love (see JCSP, 226), or when he describes sheep as "hermit living things" in a poem which celebrates solitude (see PJC, II, 239). The full range of Clare's empathy is amazingly wide, continually reinforcing the bond between the poet and his environment and enabling him to externalize his inner feelings. In one of his earliest poems he tells us that

... e'en a post, old standard, or a stone
Moss'd o'er by age, and branded as her own,
Would in my mind a strong attachment gain ...
(JCSP, 5)

The poet takes a walk "to sympathize / With nature" (PJC, II, 125) — or, as he puts it elsewhere in an almost Hartleyan way, "to sympathise / And meet vibrating joys" (CSPP, 172). Clare endows stocks and stones with a life beyond that of mere materialism, and comes to look on everyday objects as personal friends, all integral to Nature's "sympathizing scenes" (PJC, I, 121).³⁹

³⁹ Occasionally Clare uses the landscape for the sake of contrast with his own lot rather than for comparison. Autumn changes everything, "But nature finds no change in me" (LPJC, 57); Man's life "bears no kin" to the happiness of cowslips (see PJC, I, 353); the cows and sheep are free, "While I am lone and desolate" (PJCM, 122). Some of the analogies which he draws have a wider application to the lot of Man in general. As some plants receive water on hot days and others do not, "So in the world, some thrive, and fare but ill, / While others riot, and have plenty still" (PJC, I, 534). As the snail vacates its shell, "So pass we from the world's affairs" (PJC, I, 196). As

A step beyond the suggestion of imaginative empathy between poet and Nature is the mode where natural objects are employed as "types" or "emblems" of certain states of mind. A tree-stump, for instance, may be described as "The type of broken hopes within" (PJC,II,101),⁴⁰ ruined halls as "emblems of my lot" (PJC,II,501), and mighty rocks as "The image and the prototype of rest" (LPJC,102). The violet is "A type of her who loves me still" (JCSP,301), while the dove is the type of his lover's meekness (see PJC,II,485). This is a conventional device, of course, but Clare has largely avoided its

the river flows, "So runs the life of man" (PJCM,166), and so on. There are also instances where Clare has suggested an empathy between Nature and a person other than himself. In "The Fate of Amy", for example, there are constant parallels between Amy's lot and the lot of wild flowers (see PJC,I,7-14), and elsewhere flowers are said to bloom "As tho they witnessd marys smile" (CSPP,49). An old man compares himself to "a wounded winter-stricken fly" (PJC,II,99), and a milkmaid mourns the absence of her lover just as the sheep "sorrow ... for his going away" (see E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, "Unpublished Poems by John Clare" in Malahat Review, Apr. 1967, 106-20; this poem is on p. 113). In one poem a shepherd woos his love by asking:

Shall things inanimate agree
To love, unmoving thee and me? (PJC,II,75)

⁴⁰ A different version of this poem (entitled "Langley Bush" by Tibble) is printed by Robinson and Summerfield, op. cit. (note 39 above), p. 120, though the line I have quoted is the same in both versions. This contribution of Robinson and Summerfield bears only a scanty introduction, offering no dates for the poems printed and no acknowledgement of the already published version of "Langley Bush".

moralistic tendency,⁴¹ just as he has generally refrained from using the word "type" to establish a relationship between this world and the next. This latter function is apparent in Joseph Butler's epitaph which credits him with "finding in outward and visible things the type and evidence of those within the veil,"⁴² and Wordsworth was later to hail common objects as "The types and symbols of Eternity" (Prelude, VI, 639). Harold Toliver, in his Pastoral Forms and Attitudes, has a chapter on "Wordsworth's Two Natures",⁴³ in which he distinguishes between "a nature of concrete materiality" and a nature composed of "Characters of the great Apocalypse", but the tension between the two is not so "troublesome" in Clare as Toliver finds it to be in Wordsworth; in fact, one contemporary reviewer of Platonic persuasion censured Clare for failing "to look upon the beauties of Nature as faint types at

⁴¹ Southey's "The Holly Tree" is an example of this tendency:
 I love to view these things with curious eyes,
 And moralise:
 And in this wisdom of the Holly Tree
 Can emblems see
 Wherewith perchance to make a pleasant rhyme,
 One which may profit in the after time.

⁴² Quoted by Basil Willey in his Eighteenth Century Background (London: Chatto and Windus, 1950), p. 76.

⁴³ Harold Toliver, Pastoral Forms and Attitudes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) chapter 10.

best of a far more exceeding and eternal glory."⁴⁴

Certainly Clare looked to Nature for glimpses of eternity, but he was not prepared to admit that the Nature he loved was of inferior beauty to the world within the veil. The world within differs from the world without only in respect of freedom from the tyranny of Man, since Man it is who is responsible for the desecration of Nature. When Clare speaks of "types of eternity", therefore, he is referring simply to conventional memento mori such as tombstones (see PJC, II, 113) or yew trees⁴⁵ and not to dim shadows of the hereafter.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Clare's use of Nature as emblematic of human emotions will be found to lead eventually to an

⁴⁴ Josiah Conder, review of The Shepherd's Calendar in Eclectic Review, July 1827, 509-21; Storey p. 205.

⁴⁵ See Prose (Tibble, 1951) p. 128.

⁴⁶ Despite her reluctance to admit the spiritual significance of Clare's sense of "eternity" (see above p.94), Janet Todd contends that he posits Nature in the asylum poems as "the metaphysical type of God's joy in creation." (Janet Todd, "In Adam's Garden: a study of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33, 768A (Florida); microfilm p. 203.) Clare's last nature poems are described by Dr. Todd as "typographical" [sic; "typological" presumably is intended] : "Edenic nature becomes a type of divine peace, and wild nature a type of the final destruction of corrupt humanity and nature" (p. 193). Clare does not, however, use the word "type" itself in this way, except perhaps in the quotation on p.176 below.

awareness of the abiding presence of God, and a comparison with Wordsworth may not be inappropriate:

To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
I gave a moral life: I saw them feel,
Or linked them to some feeling: the great mass
Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all
That I beheld respired with inward meaning.

(Prelude, III, 130-5)

Clare endorses the early Wordsworthian philosophy of Nature at least insofar as he links natural forms to some feeling in the process of becoming attuned to Nature's "inward meaning", though he does not (as I shall show) go all the way with Wordsworth's animistic doctrine of the "quickeningsoul".⁴⁷ Since the feelings which Clare ascribes to natural forms correspond with his own it must be admitted that he is, in the words of one reviewer, "guilty of the

⁴⁷ H.W. Piper defines animism as "the belief that [the pantheistic spirit] could be found in each natural object and that, through the imagination, a real communication was possible between man and the forms of nature." (H.W. Piper, The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of the Imagination in the English Romantic Poets; London: Athlone Press, 1962; p.4.) Clare undoubtedly attributes consciousness and personality to natural forms (animatism), and achieves imaginative dialogue with them, but he does not endow them with a pantheistic spirit in such a way that God has no existence beyond physical matter or sensation. The extent to which Wordsworth himself espoused animism is debatable. Paul Sheats has recently argued that the traditional understanding of Wordsworth as a poet who "not only animated but deified material things" is incorrect, and that although he "asserts the existence in the temporal world of a 'spirit', 'mind', or 'life' ... he never explicitly identifies [these] with God or with matter." This argument amounts to a refutation of Wordsworth's animism in favour of "a conception of a Trinitarian God that is both immanent and transcendent." (Paul D. Sheats, The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785-1798; Harvard University Press, 1973; p. 211.)

pathetic fallacy",⁴⁸ though some have sought to deny it. R.H. Stoddard, writing in 1893, argued that Clare describes Nature "for its own sake, and not for the human quality which the present race of poets are striving to infuse into it,"⁴⁹ and his defence has recently been corroborated by Elaine Feinstein, who finds of Clare's 1835-37 poems that "their ability to move us is never tainted with anthropomorphic sentiment."⁵⁰ Janet Todd remarks of Clare's descriptive mode:

Although inevitably colored to some extent by the poet's emotions, these descriptions clearly exist for their own sake and not for any insight they might provide into the mental states of the poet. If Clare appears at all in the poem, it is as a perceiver and physical guide rather than as a feeling and imaginative creator.⁵¹

Edmund Blunden, however, has rightly commented on the "happiness of animation" in Clare's "Autumn" (SPP, 134-7), and instances the sedge and salallows which "woo the winds", the floods which are as "lawless" as trespassers, and the

⁴⁸ Times Literary Supplement, 14 May 1954, 311.

⁴⁹ R.H. Stoddard, Under the Evening Lamp (London: Gay and Bird, 1893), p. 132; Storey p. 299.

⁵⁰ Elaine Feinstein, op. cit. (see note 17 above), p. 18.

⁵¹ Janet Todd, In Adam's Garden: A Study of John Clare's Pre-Asylum Poetry (University of Florida Humanities Monograph number 39, 1973), p. 9. Dr. Todd evidently makes an exception of some of Clare's bird poems: "The Sky Lark" (SPP, 77) is concerned with "the human response to, and not the reality of, an object ... " (pp. 51-2).

lark which springs up "to cheer the bankrupt pomp" of the season.⁵² Robert Waller has similarly appraised "Helpstone Green" (PJC, I, 35) as an example of the poet's "to some extent feeling anthropomorphically",⁵³ and Robert Pinsky has cited the poems of 1835-37 as illustrative of Clare's use of "animal distress as a fitting emblem of human feeling."⁵⁴ Obviously Clare's poetry is at times subject to the strictures of Ruskin against the pathetic fallacy,⁵⁵ but his use of this device makes him one of the company of Coleridge, who delighted in finding in Nature "dim sympathies with me who live" ("Frost at Midnight", l.18), and of Wordsworth, who considered such sentiments to be "one of the products of man's highest creative faculty",⁵⁶ and

⁵² Edmund Blunden, Nature in English Literature (London: Woolf, 1929), p. 58; Storey p. 380.

⁵³ Robert Waller, "Enclosures: the Ecological Significance of a Poem by John Clare" in Mother Earth: Journal of the Soil Association, July 1964, 234.

⁵⁴ Robert Pinsky, "That Sweet Man, John Clare" in The Rarer Action, ed. A. Cheuse and R. Koffler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971) pp. 258-74. In "Badger", for instance, "the most notable moments in the diction suggest human life" (p. 265), and in "The Hedgehog", "precisely observed animal life again objectifies human feelings of defeat and privation" (p. 267).

⁵⁵ See John Ruskin, Modern Painters, III (1856), pt. iv, ch.12, in E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds., The Works of John Ruskin (London: George Allen, 1904), vol. V, pp. 201-20.

⁵⁶ J.V. Logan, "Wordsworth and the Pathetic Fallacy" in Modern Language Notes, lv, 1940, 187-91. For a full discussion of the attitudes of Coleridge, Ruskin, and Hopkins to the pathetic fallacy see Patricia Ball, The Science of Aspects (London: Athlone Press, 1971).

with these poets he shares cognizance of the spiritual value of the natural world.

Clare's use of anthropomorphic imagery is wide-ranging. I have shown in chapter three that he attributes to animals, birds, and flowers the faculty of "taste" or "creative choice" (CSPP,149); another of their powers, it seems, is to be able to communicate joy or sorrow to Man. In spring the primrose "trembles up", half joyful, half fearful (PJC,II,63), and in summer the forget-me-not "Smiles love and welcome to the passer bye."⁵⁷ Trees and bushes "speak" to the poet of love — "The very hedges find a voice ... " (PJC,II,502); the wind "whispers tales of Mary" (PJC,II,497); the evening gales "whisper joy" (LPJC, 50). Insects and flowers are said to "court" the poet's eye (PJC,I,72); the river goes "softly grieving" by (PJC,II,15); and dewdrops, of course, function as the "tears" of Nature (see PJC,II,465 and 487). In the song "Love for Everything" the whole landscape is shown to be sympathetic to his sweetheart, so that even the road on which she walks "looked love where she had gone" (PJC,II,493). The poet's relationship with the environment involves not merely a "botanical" curiosity but an active interchange of feelings, so that the mind is ever half-perceiving, half-creating, and Nature is ever "Giving and finding joy" (PJC,II,142).

⁵⁷ From "Verse Scraps" in E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, "Unpublished Poems by John Clare" in Listener, 29 Mar. 1962, 557. For a discussion of Clare's use of flower-names and also of bird-calls, see chapter 5 of this thesis.

Observe the flowers around us, how they live
 Not only for themselves, as we may feel,
 But for the joy which they to others give;
 For Nature never will her gifts conceal
 From those who love to seek them ...

(PJC, II, 143)⁵⁸

Cecil Day Lewis, in his chapter on "Country Lyrics" in The Lyric Impulse, quotes F.T. Palgrave's comments on William Barnes, comments which, says Lewis, "could largely be applied to Clare as well": " ... he does not, with the Greeks, treat nature as the outward manifestation of divine or half-divine existence. She appears, rather, as a sort of unconscious reflex of human life."⁵⁹ I have been dealing so far with this unconscious (and sometimes conscious) "reflex", but I believe that Clare goes further than this and does in fact perceive the "divine or half-divine" in Nature, though not to the extent of espousing pantheism.

⁵⁸ The similarity in lines 1-3 to Blake's "Book of Thel" 69-70, is probably co-incidental, though a cryptic remark amongst Clare's prose fragments reveals that he knew something of Blake: "Blake was brave by instinct & honest by choice" (Prose; Tibble, 1951; p. 228). There is also a sonnet by Clare to Blake, as yet unpublished (see Eleanor Nicholes, "The Shadowed Mind: a study of the change in style of the poetry of John Clare ... "; unpublished dissertation, New York, 1950; p. 285 and note 33). Clare met T.G. Wainewright, a Blake admirer, in London in 1822. A more probable source for the sonnets from which these lines are taken is Matthew VI: 28-30 or Luke XII: 27-28 (cf. note 91 below). With lines 4-5 of this quotation cf. Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey", 122-3, and Coleridge, "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison", 59-60.

⁵⁹ C. Day Lewis, op. cit. (see note 34 above), p. 128.

In order to illustrate the various levels of meaning which the natural world may have for Clare, I would choose one particular aspect of Nature for closer study of its place in Clare's poetry, and I take my cue from an anonymous review of the Tibbles' biography of Clare of 1956. In "the single image of the sun," the reviewer writes,

the development of Clare's poetry — Clare's life indeed — can also be traced from beginning to end. The sun is the king-image of Clare's poetry, much as it is of Turner's painting. It is the red and roundy, red-complexioned sun of early poems and early experience, which rose over the fens as Clare went to work, winter or summer. It gives a glitter to cesspools (in 'The Mouse's Nest'). It is, or it was — 'A splendid sun hath set!' — Clare's alter ego, Lord Byron. The sun, indeed, is hope, nature, love ('sun of undying light'), eternity; proffering at last to Clare the 'eternal ray' he snatched to write himself into freedom and immortality in his deepest and most clinching poem ['A Vision' (CSPP, 225)] .⁶⁰

These comments need some qualification, but their insistence on the importance of the sun, the animator of all organic life and, symbolically, of all spiritual awareness, is soundly based.

The descriptive phrases which accompany reference to the sun in Clare's poetry point both to its beauty and to its awesome power. There is often a refreshing literalness about Clare's descriptions of the natural world, and the sun is very frequently pictured as "A ball o' fire" (PJCM, 177), not simply as a remote source of heat and light.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Times Literary Supplement, 27 Apr. 1956, 252; Storey p. 420. Andrew Young in his chapter on Clare in The Poet and the Landscape (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962) also remarks on his "intimate" feeling for the sun (p. 176).

⁶¹ Clare makes curious use of the ball of fire as a simile in one poem, rather than as literal truth: "The sun set like a ball of fire" (PJCM, 175).

Its colour is nearly always emphatically red,⁶² and it "sets the woods a-blazing" (PJCM,149), staining the earth with its own complexion. Sunrise awakens the anthem of the lark and the poet is "warm'd in ecstasy" (PJC,I,263); sunset coaxes out the coy rabbit and the cricket, and the poet is "doubly happy" (JCSP,32). Broad daylight is usually associated with joyful vitality (see e.g. PJC, I,280; LPJC,276), as opposed to stagnation and despondency which are attended by the "pale sun",⁶³ but the full force of the noon-day sun can be rather overpowering. At noon the bees "are faint and cease to hum" (CSPP,51), and "The very buzz of flies is heard no more" (PJC,I,271). Harvesters, ploughmen, and poets are forced to cease their labours and seek the shelter of some cool retreat.⁶⁴ At

⁶² E.g. "red and roundy" (PJC,I,41), "round and red" (PJC,I,97), "morn's red sun" (PJC,II,127), "red rose the sun" (LPJC,59), "the sun went down / Copper red a burning ball ... " (LPJC,215); see also PJC,I,65, 138,254; SC,6; LPJC,167,173; and many more examples. For a "golden" sun see PJC,I,75; PJC,II,89; LPJC, 168,191, and 214. For a "mottled" sun see LPJC,222 and cf. PJC,II, 307.

⁶³ See e.g. SC,116; LPJC,65,266; PJC,II,522. Occasionally, however, the pale sun has a beauty of its own: see PJC,II,150; LPJC,129,220.

⁶⁴ See e.g. PJC,I,184,276; SC,65,134-5; PJC,II,127,142. Clare may be influenced here by Thomson, who laments the blasting of "the roseate bloom / Of beauty" by the sun's "oppressive ray" (Seasons,II,884-8). An interesting parallel may be found in Coleridge's references to the sun as inimical to frail beauty and to the workings of the imagination. R.A. Durr suggests that the branch of ash in "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison" is described as "unsunn'd" because the bridge of the imagination must be protected from a stark, hostile light, and finds similar instances in "Songs of the Pixies", "Lines on an Autumnal Evening", "To the Author of Poems", and many other pieces. (R.A. Durr, " 'This Lime-Tree Bower my

times Clare even goes as far as to shun the light of day and to court the "cooling sweets" of evening (PJC,I,122) or the "calmness" of twilight (PJC,I,273), though he is aware of the emptiness of darkness, "by glooms deprest" (PJC,II,65).⁶⁵

By far the majority of Clare's references to the sun indicate a love of its animating warmth and illumination. The sun "brings forth / Creations every hour" (PJC,I,433), so that wild flowers are "cloth'd in the sun" (PJC,I,92)

Prison' and a Recurrent Action in Coleridge" in ELH, Dec. 1959, 514-30). Clare accuses the sun of withering the primrose (see PJC,I,517) and of drying "all moisture with his scorching ray" (PJC,II,437). Denuded woodlands leave the streams "All desolate and naked to the sun" (PJC,II,297). Fairy folk hide from "summer's noon" (PJC,II,203), and insects ("fairey folk in splendid masquerade"), though they "love the shine / Of noon", shun the "glaring day" (SPP,84). There is, however, such a thing as "fairy sunshine" (PJC,II,132), and the sun is also benign to insects in "The Tulip and the Bee", printed by Grigson, op. cit. (see note 35 above), p. 115, in which a flower shuts when the sun is obscured by cloud, and the bee is imprisoned and dies. Clare occasionally shares the Coleridgean corollary of a hostile sun, viz a fascination with moonlight, which is included in the setting of a good many of his idyllic love songs (see e.g. LPJC,159,213,220,224-5, 260; JCSP,339, 340; PJCM,185). In "Moonlight Walk" the moon has a religious serenity — "I fancy that my God is near" (PJCM,137); and in "The Pleasures of Spring" the moon is like Heaven or Eden (see chapter 3 above, note 42).

- ⁶⁵ Rather conventionally, perhaps, he describes the "poet pastoral" as a "lover of the shade" (PJC,II,144), and desires retreat to "the loneliest shade" (PJC,II,375). There is real pathos, however, in his song "I fly from all I prize the most ...":
- I shun green fields and hate the light,
The glorious sun, the peaceful moon.
More welcome is the darkest night —
Then glaring daylight comes too soon.
(PJCM,143)

and "New blooming blossoms 'neath the sun are born" (PJC,I,266). It is described as "allseeing" (SPP,83), "all-cheering" (PJC,II,118), and "unfetter'd" (PJC,I,206), and without its presence all beauties are "but poor shadows" (PJC,II,106). It is the sun for which Clare longs during his confinement in the asylum: the "forest prison" finds no pleasure in "sunny noon" (LPJC,89), and the poet feels that his heart has become "A shade unsunned in dark eternity" (LPJC,100).⁶⁶ Quite naturally Clare begins to use the sun as a metaphor of hope and renewal, as an emblem of his own emotions, and this is an intermediate step, as I have suggested, between a material and a spiritual apprehension of Nature. Every detail of the landscape is part of "Loves register", and is therefore stamped with the divine, but in order to emphasise the relationship which Nature effects between Man and God, the poet is anxious to credit the trees or the birds or the sun with certain qualities which bespeak both their power to evince the Creator and their willingness to sympathize with mankind. Besides being literally a ball of fire, then, the sun symbolizes the presence of the hope, joy, and love which attend Man's communion with God.

⁶⁶ At times, it seems, not even the sun can dispel Clare's gloomy thoughts. In one of the Mary ballads the poet complains: "The very sun looks on me now / A being dead and cold" (LPJC,182), and in an earlier poem (1827) he regrets that though the sun is "cheery", the lover's broken hopes cannot be mended (see Hyder E. Rollins, "A Poem by John Clare" in Harvard Library Bulletin, Winter 1949, 147-8).

As a symbol of hope the sun is usually depicted as following a dire storm. "The clouds of fear and doubt" have dispersed, "And now hope's sun is looking brighter out" (PJC, I, 228). Hope's sun "Cheers every thing that lives" (SPP, 169), and Clare assures us that " 'neath the blackest cloud, a sunbeam flings / Its cheering promise" (PJC, II, 133). Without that promise of happier times to come, Clare feels his life is cast into "shadows w[h]ere a sun hath been" (CSPP, 85), and the first song in his "Child Harold" tells of his despair in similar terms:

My hopes are all hopeless
My skys have no sun ... (LPJC, 36)⁶⁷

It is the transience of sunlight that induces Clare to associate it with life's dearest but most vulnerable values. The long absence of the sun during winter is like an "imprisonment" (PJC, I, 394), but the February thaw is a reassertion of freedom (see SC, 22-8). The fact that sunlight is subject to meteorological change suggests further analogies. Genius is like "a sunburst from a cloud" (PJC, II, 116). Wisdom is the "one bright focus" from which our "threads of light" emanate (CSPP, 153). Fame is "A solitary glory" in a darkening sky (PJC, II, 107).⁶⁸ All mortal things must perish, "As 'neath approaching tempests

⁶⁷ The loss of "blissfull pleasures" is also likened to the disappearance of the sun (CSPP, 48), though Clare disturbs the continuity of his metaphors by suggesting in The Shepherd's Calendar that "Pleasures ... like to shades depart" (SC, 43).

⁶⁸ Clare's unpunctuated version of this sonnet on "Fame" is printed by D.B. Green in Review of English Literature, Apr. 1966, 90.

sinks the sun" (PJC,I,399). But above all, the sun is an image of love:

I live in love sun of undying light ... (LPJC,42)
 Love's home is "the brightest sun", its canopy "the bluest sky" (JCSP,336). Such a triumphant metaphor must be weighed against the utterances of more disillusioned moments — "My sun of love was short — and clouded long / And now its shadow fills a feeble song" (LPJC,77) — but Clare's belief in the principle of universal love is often stated with assurance and with eloquence:

'Tis Adam's love for Adam's kin
 That Eden of earth's liberty,
 That triumphed over death and sin,
 And will in nature's love be free.
 'Twas so when this our world begun
 Love bright and lasting as the sun. (PJCM,149)

Moreover, the imagery of the sun is frequently applied to Mary or to one of his other sweethearts. His loved one is "Dear as summer to the sun" (LPJC,66); she is "The sunlight i' the stream" (JCSP,328);⁶⁹ she is "Like Sun in darkness" (PJCM,210). Even after his death her memory "will shine like a sun on my grave" (LPJC,37). A maiden's eyes are "Like midday suns in splendour bright" (PJC,II, 102) ... "as bright as the suns liquid fire" (LPJC,217) ... "suns o' living light" (PJCM,197).⁷⁰ A maiden's breasts

⁶⁹ Clare offers this image as an example of "A sweetness nothing would destroy", but in "Child Harold" a similar image is one of frailty:

Doe's [sic] Real Love On Earth Exist
 Tis Like A Sun beam On The Mist
 That Fades And No Where Will Remain
 And Nowhere Is Oertook Again (LPJC,70)

⁷⁰ Cf. PJCM,113 and 138.

"peep from her kerchief folds / Like sunshine thro' a parting cloud" (PJC,II,209).

Many of the examples which I have quoted show a recurring preoccupation with the sun's penetration of an overcast sky, and by exploring this further we may find a clue to Clare's religious symbolism.

Now suns are clear, now clouds pervade,
Each moment chang'd, and chang'd again;
And first a light, and then a shade,
Swift glooms and brightens o'er the plain.
(PJC,I,173)⁷¹

This is the sun that "gilds and glooms by turns" (PJC,I,355), and the contrast is one which continues to fascinate Clare in his asylum verse:

The leaves of autumn drop by twos and threes,
And the black cloud hung o'er the old low church
Is fixed as is a rock that never stirs.
But look again and you may well perceive
The weathercock is in another sky,
And the cloud passing leaves the blue behind.
(PJC,II,413)

The fluctuation of the sun's light naturally suggests the changeableness of fame, of hope, and of love:

Love is an April sky of various shades,
Today all sunshine and all showers tomorrow ...
(JCSP,283)

When the sun eventually succeeds in mastering the clouds, all is joyful once more (see e.g. PJC,I,222), and Clare is prompted to image his greatest joys — the memories of childhood — in these terms: "Their spirit thro the gloom appears / As suns behind a cloud" (SC,41). The clouds, of course, represent evil, or at least the obstacles which

⁷¹ A variant reading of this stanza is printed by A.J.V. Chapple, op. cit. (see note 37 above), p. 45.

impede a purity of vision: Clare speaks of clouds as the products of "an evil hour" (SPP,38), as the spoilers of the bright sun's "little reign" (PJC,II,271), and uses such metaphors as "clouds of malice" (JCSP,206) and "Cares thickest cloud" (LPJC,56). "The clearest sky is never without clouds" (PJC,I,529),⁷² and so "Loves However Dear Must Meet With Clouds" (LPJC,73). In one of his early sonnets Clare describes the "hereafter" as succeeding this life like "trembling sunbeams creeping from the storm" (PJC,I,266), and many other poems develop an association between the sun and spiritual life. Sunrise becomes the hour of glory (see SC,44), a foretaste of Eternity (see PJC,I,411), and an illumination of "heaven's gate", though significantly there are clouds to hinder the ultimate view, as if "To hide its grand magnificence" (PJC,I,519). Sunset becomes an image of declining life — "So sets the Christian's sun" (JCSP,24) — but it leads us on "another world to meet" (PJC,I,533), a world "unknown to care" (PJC,I,520).

⁷² Cf. "View but the clearest sky, / And thou shalt find a cloud" (PJC,II,184), but note the line from a sonnet: "The sun reigned absolute in cloudless sky" (PJC,I,541). Cf. Bloomfield: "No clouds obscur'd the face of heav'n ... " ("A Visit to Whittlebury Forest", VII,2). In at least one poem the clouds themselves, rather than the sun, are likened to hope: "His hopes, they change like summer clouds" (PJC,I,430).

The sunset even of a winter's day
 Leaves beauties every time it goes away,
 And in the west most gloriously weaves
 A world of visions, every time it leaves.
 Oh, when life's voyage in these storms is done,
 For such a city clothed in such a sun!

(PJC, II, 304)

In the asylum poems death is welcomed as "a sunset's happy close" (JCSP, 285), and the sunset in turn becomes "God's crimson bed" (PJCM, 209) and "one short glance of / Heaven from the sky" (PJCM, 190). The one quality of the sun which attracts Clare most is its eternal light: it is "the grand eternal sun" (PJC, II, 73), "heaven's eternal ray" (PJCM, 151), "The ever burning bright eternal Sun" (LPJC, 135). The final step, of course, must be the sun's representation of God Himself, and here there is the noble precedent of Thomson:

... and thou, O Sun!
 Soul of surrounding worlds! in whom best seen
 Shines out thy Maker! (Seasons, II, 94-6)

Great source of day! best image here below
 Of thy Creator ... (A Hymn on the Seasons, 66-7) ⁷³

⁷³ "Le soleil occupe naturellement la place d'honneur dans les ciels diurnes de Brockes, de Thomson et de leurs continuateurs." Paul van Tieghem, Le Sentiment de la Nature dans le Prérromantisme Européen (Paris: Nizet, 1960), p. 131. Cf. the association between the Sun and the Supreme Being of Eastern culture: the ancient Tamils "found that the rising Sun which was the nearest vestige to His greatness and glory was red, and hence they called the God too Ceeyoon [=Sun]." Xavier S. Thani Nayagam, Landscape and Poetry: A Study of Nature in Classical Tamil Poetry (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 59. A multitude of other sun-gods will be found in chapters XII-XVI of J.G. Frazer's The Worship of Nature (London: Macmillan, 1926). Janet Todd suggests that a probable source of Clare's sun-worship is Dantë's Divine Comedy (see Todd; dissertation, note 46 above; p. 166).

Clare's version of God the Sun, as we might expect, involves the presence of veiling clouds:

...his sun forever shines
— He hides his face and troubles they increase
He smiles — the sun looks out in wealth and peace
(LPJC, 52)

The sky becomes charged with "heavenly light" which no cloud "dares soil" (PJC, II, 15), though should one so dare the poet can say:

How blest the cloud seems in the blue
That near the sun appears to lie ... (LPJC, 102)

In an early poem "To the Clouds" Clare wishes that the clouds would disperse so that he might "catch a glimpse of Him who bids you reign, / And view the dwelling of all majesty" (PJC, I, 235). In using this kind of metaphor he reminds us of Shaftesbury's declaration that God is a "mysterious being, which to our weak eyes appears at best under a veil of cloud",⁷⁴ and the same image is a favourite of Coleridge:

... The veiling clouds retire,
And lo! the Throne of the redeeming God ...
(*"Religious Musings"*,
398-9)⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, and Times* (1711). Ed. J.M. Robertson (London: Grant Richards, 1900), vol. II, p. 124.

⁷⁵ Cf. "such hues / As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes / Spirits perceive his presence" ("This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison", 41-3). In an earlier draft of this poem the word "cloathe" is used instead of "veil", and the difference is of theological importance. James Benziger writes: "Coleridge in his *Conversation Poems* is closer to the pre-Romantics than to Wordsworth, Shelley, or Keats: the beauty of nature may push back the clouds, but only to reveal a heaven which he knew was there all the while." (Benziger; op. cit., note 7 above; p. 26). Coleridge has long been supposed not to have known Shaftesbury's work (see e.g. R.L. Brett, *Fancy and Imagination*; London: Methuen, 1969; p. 26), but recently this has been disputed (see Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969; p. vii).

One of Clare's asylum fragments is worth quoting in full for its variation on this theme to account for the poet's distress:

A dull gloom hangs above the peaceful fields,
 And in the moody mist the houses sleep,
 Still, as if tenantless. The vapour shields
 The heavens like a secret, that would keep
 The doom sealed over our dull hours of sleep.
 The evening comes as something not forgiven,
 The clouds hang lowly, but forbear to weep;
 Noontide and evening weigh the balance even,
 And gloom shuts Hope's eyes from the sight of Heaven.
(PJCM, 134)⁷⁶

Although Clare uses the natural world as an agent of God's power and love, it is evident that he does not identify the Creator with Creation in a pantheistic way. Certainly he uses anthropomorphic imagery to suggest a sympathy between Man and Nature, just as he uses simile and metaphor to associate Nature and God. The sun acquires humanness by its rising from bed in the morning (see PJC, II, 135) and returning to bed at night (see PJC, I, 88); it has a "reddening face" (PJC, I, 367), which is sometimes "loath to smile" (PJC, I, 368); it may grow "faint and weary" (PJC, I, 372) and stop to rest on a hill (see PJC, II, 67). At Northborough it even seems to lose its

⁷⁶ Note, however, Clare's description of the night sky in "The Pleasures of Spring":

The clouds in beautious [sic] order thro the sky
 Veil & not hide the moonlight passing bye
 Mantled in beautious forms that seem to be
 The travelling spirits of eternity.

(Printed by Richmond; appendix to op. cit., note 5 above; p. 240.)

Cf. Wordsworth: "The sky is overcast / With a continuous cloud of texture close, / Heavy and wan, all whitened by the Moon, / Which through that veil is indistinctly seen ... " ("A Night-Piece", 1-4).

Veiled light is also a favourite Shelleyan image: see J.J. McGann, "Shelley's Veils: A Thousand Images of Loveliness" in Romantic and Victorian: Studies in

way (see CSPP, 198 and 205).⁷⁷ But this is not to say that the sun is literally possessed of feelings and desires, and similarly the association between the sun and God is the product of fancy. In one of his sonnets, "The Fountain of Hope", Clare sees the spirit or "essence" of Man ascending Adonais-like to become a star, "in those mighty skies, / Where God, the sun, smiles on it like a flower" (PJC, II, 111), but the image here is strictly figurative, just as it is in an asylum stanza in which the sun is compared with the eye of God:

God looks on nature with a glorious eye
And blesses all creation with the sun
Its drapery of green and brown earth ocean lie
In morning as Creation just begun
That saffron [sic] east fortells the riseing sun
And who can look upon that majesty
Of light brightness and splendour nor feel won
With love of him whose bright all seeing eye
Feeds the days light with Immortality (LPJC, 147)

Clare makes it quite apparent in other verses that God is a power greater than the sun, greater than the natural world which shows him forth. In a sonnet to "The Deity" he proclaims that God, the "known Unknown", breathed into the sun "And instant kindled his eternal fire" (PJC, II, 104). His clearest statement of God's dominion over the sun is the asylum poem "The Sun", in which he hails this "Grand

Memory of William H. Marshall, ed. W.P. Elledge and R.L. Hoffman (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), pp. 198-218.

⁷⁷ It has been argued that personifying images were used by eighteenth-century poets with a possible "pantheistic significance". See C.V. Deane, Aspects of Eighteenth Century Nature Poetry (Oxford: Blackwell, 1935), pp. 10-11.

source of life and light", notes that it shone even before Adam and Eve — "Perhaps a million years" — and asks the question: "Is he the Lord of light?"

Is he the Lord of light?
 Is he the great Supreme?
 In selfish eyes he might
 Who mock the Seraphim.
 Who scans the author right
 Will darker errors shun,
 And feel that Power above, more bright,
 Can mar that glorious Sun. (PJCM, 131-2)

But if God is ultimately the "Power above", or the Power "within the veil", He is also, as I suggested earlier, capable of making His presence immanent in Nature, and in holding to this belief Clare is in conformity with the majority of physico-theological poets of the eighteenth century, who were not so much pantheists as panentheists. Clare would have been as reluctant to accept a religion centered entirely on the physical evidence of the natural world as he would have been to deny the potential of Nature to communicate God's presence. Clare's vision consists in perceiving the relationship between the material and the spiritual, in seeing through the veil, just as the sun penetrates the clouds. If I have reiterated this point it is because it has escaped the great majority of Clare's critics. Those who have tackled the subject of Clare's religion, like Cecil Day Lewis whom I quoted above, have tended to shy away from the divinization of Nature altogether. Edmund Gosse could not understand Edmund Blunden's remark that Clare had "a sense of the God in the Fly and

the Cataract",⁷⁸ and more recently Elaine Feinstein has maintained that Clare's poetry "is the poetry of a man who does not often look behind Nature to find God or mystery, but takes his stand in 'the real world and a doubting mind'."⁷⁹ This statement echoes Anne Tibble's observations in her introduction to the Everyman edition of Clare (JCSP), but Mrs. Tibble is more wisely circumspect:

Not always, however much one side of him might have longed to do so, could [Clare] endorse Wordsworth's 'looking through Nature up to Nature's God'. He was not, as the countryman often privately is not, religious in the dogmatic sense of the word. Throughout his poetry and prose there is evidence both for his trust in God and for scepticism. He was not consistent.⁸⁰

The point about Clare's not being religious in any dogmatic sense is endorsed by Janet Todd in her study In Adam's Garden, but she goes on to note that: "Much of the time Clare appears to have retained some trust in a rather distant God."⁸¹ Dr. Todd continues:

⁷⁸ Sunday Times, 5 Oct. 1924, 8; rpt. Edmund Gosse, Silhouettes (London: Heinemann, 1925), p. 105; Storey p. 373.

⁷⁹ Feinstein, op. cit. (see note 17 above), p. 14.

⁸⁰ Anne Tibble, introduction to JCSP, p. xxvii. The quotation "Looking through Nature up to Nature's God", from Clare's "Evening" (JCSP, 302), is actually an adaptation of Pope, Essay on Man, IV, 332.

⁸¹ Janet Todd, monograph (see note 51 above), p. 40.

Clare seems usually as certain about God's transcendence above nature as he is of His otherness and incomprehensibility. Occasionally there may be a wavering in this belief, as in "The Voice of Nature" ([PJC,] II,39), where God gives His "own language unto nature," thus implying its Edenic qualities, and thus too allowing man to worship through attending to nature's song. This may be the Christian conception of God's gift of His Word to the world, so that man may read Him in His book of nature, an idea that seems in keeping with Clare's belief in the divine marks on nature. Yet, although Clare refers several times in his poetry to the book of nature, the book yields for him not a Christian⁸² allegory of God, but simply its own beauty.

It behoves us to look very closely at the evidence which modifies this argument.

To begin with, the notion of being able to discern the Creator in Creation is not strictly a Christian teaching. Certainly Saint Paul affirms that "the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Romans I: 20), but the same belief may be found in many of the psalms of the Old Testament.⁸³ Anne Tibble has suggested that

⁸² *ibid.*, pp. 40-1.

⁸³ Psalm 148, which Clare paraphrased very early in his career (see *JCSP*, 10) is a fine example. It is significant that three of Clare's later paraphrases of the psalms (19, 97, 104) should be of the same kind; the remaining five (51, 56, 91, 102, 137) are cries for God's help and mercy. Only one of the later paraphrases has been published (psalm 102: see *LPJC*, 160); reference to the others I have gleaned from David Powell, *op. cit.* (see note 15 above), p. 41, and Margaret Grainger, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the John Clare Collection in Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery* (Peterborough Museum Society, 1973), p. 35.

sources of this doctrine may be found in the Rig Vedas and in the Greek Dionysiac worship of Nature,⁸⁴ and one could argue, with Robert Waller, that: "Primitive man knew that a world existed outside himself, but he thought it was of the same spirit as himself and that he was linked with it in a kind of extra-sensory brotherhood ... Nature was divine: it was also infinitely extensive and powerful."⁸⁵ For the first eleven centuries of the Christian era the thinking of Western civilization about Nature seems to have been dominated by a distrust of physical sensation which survives as late as St. Anselm, but in the late twelfth century, as Kenneth Clark has put it, "the frozen crust of monastic fear" is broken through⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Tibble, op. cit. (see note 80 above), p. xxvii. Cf. Nayagam, op. cit. (see note 73 above), p. 132: "When the Greek viewed a rapid torrent, a stream, a fountain, or a line of high cliffs, he saw behind them an animate, divine spirit. Woods and hills, meadows and brooks, trees and branches, were peopled with divine forms of greater or lesser importance ... The Tamils too people their glades, mountain tops and copses with godlings and spirits." See also H.R. Fairclough, Love of Nature Among the Greeks and Romans (London: Harrap, 1930) and Victor De Laprade, Le Sentiment de la Nature avant le Christianisme (Paris, 1866).

⁸⁵ Waller, op. cit. (see note 53 above), p. 233.

⁸⁶ Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art (London: John Murray, 1949), p. 3. See also F.W. Moorman, The Interpretation of Nature in English Poetry from Beowulf to Shakespeare (Strassburg: K.J. Trübner, 1905); Alfred Biese, The Development of the Feeling for Nature in the Middle Ages and Modern Times (English translation, London: Routledge, 1905); and E.C. Knowlton, "Nature in Middle English" in Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 20, 1921, 186-207.

and Nature becomes once more a "microtheos". A love of nature is very evident in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell, and Milton, but not until the eighteenth century does English poetry become inspired by a physico-theology which had been steadily gathering momentum during the previous century, and which profited by the reaction against the excessively urban ethos of the Restoration.

C.A. Moore writes:

From Cudworth's "plastic nature" to Wordsworth's pantheism the development of the modern estimate of nature is consecutive ... [but] the apotheosis of nature as a moral and spiritual force came into our popular literature only after rationalism had passed beyond the limits sanctioned by the Church. The modern cult of nature-worship is in its origin, then, unorthodox — the result of a revived pagan philosophy enriched by the discoveries of modern science. There are in the Bible, of course, many passages pointing in the same direction and glowing with Eastern fervor; but the Church⁸⁷ itself discouraged the pursuit of such ideas.

The list of poets appealing to natural religion from Needler to Wordsworth is a formidable one, but Clare must have been familiar with a good many of them. Akenside, Cowper, Mallet, and Thomson were in his own library, and it is likely that in the course of his browsing at Drury's bookshop or at Milton Hall he could have made the acquaintance of Bidlake, Ralph, Stevenson, Gisborne, Carey, Savage, and Wright. In Cowper, Gisborne, and Stevenson he would have found an insistence on grace and redemption

⁸⁷ C.A. Moore, "The Return to Nature in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century" in Studies in Philology, 1917, 243-91; this quotation is from p. 289. Basil Willey gives an account of the development of natural religion in his Eighteenth Century Background (see above note 42).

as necessary adjuncts to the religion of Nature, and would have become familiar with the theological marriage between belief in immanence and faith in a personal God. There is hardly a "nature poet" in the eighteenth century who is not influenced to some extent by what might be called "rural Christianity",⁸⁸ and Clare need have looked no further than Bloomfield for affirmations of "GOD in every shining stone" ("Shooter's Hill", V, 39), or than Cowper for an ecstatic glimpse of the God Transcendent —

In that blest moment Nature, throwing wide
Her veil opaque, discloses with a smile
The author of her beauties ...

(The Task, V, 891-3)

Such is the tradition which shaped the thinking of the early Wordsworth, and such is the tradition which engaged the sympathy of Clare. Even as a boy, Clare tells us, "I got a bad name among the weekly church goers forsaking the churchgoing bell & seeking the religion of the fields ..."⁸⁹ This last phrase is clarified in many of his poems: the shepherds and herdboys, for instance,

⁸⁸ The Rural Christian is the title of a poem in four books by George Wright (1776). I use this term in preference to either "deism" or "pantheism" because probably none of the eighteenth-century poets was prepared to abandon entirely the notion of a personal God. Krause's term "panentheism" has long been employed as a useful substitute, indicating a reconciliation of immanence and transcendence, but Thomas McFarland has cast doubt on the validity of such a reconciliation and argues that panentheism "cannot be considered as in any way an orthodox Christian conception." (See McFarland; op. cit. note 75 above; pp. 268-71.)

⁸⁹ Prose (Tibbels, 1951), p. 32. The phrase "the churchgoing bell", of course, is one of the "strange abuses" of Cowper to which Wordsworth objected in his Appendix to the Lyrical Ballads (1802).

ignore the chapel bells because "Fields are their church and house and all" (CSPP,134); God is not confined by the four walls of the church, since "The very air seems deified / Upon a sabbath day" (CSPP,181); and moreover, the worship of God belongs not only to Sundays, since Nature has a way of "making sabbaths of each common day" (PJC,I,535). A passage from "The Progress of Ryhme" [sic] conceives of Nature as a vast temple, in which insects, flowers, and "spirits" congregate "As tho' twas natures very place / Of worship", their purpose being "To sing their makers mighty powers" (SPP,121). In such a temple the "droning dragon flye on rude bassoon / Striveth to give God thanks" (CSPP,167), and the merry thrush sings "hymns to sunrise" (JCSP,217). Again in the asylum poems Clare recalls that in happier days "My drink was the fountain my church the tall trees" (LPJC,247), and even in "Child Harold", even "in this winter scene of frost and storms", he can proclaim:

Bare fields the frozen lake and leafless grove
Are natures grand religion and true love
(LPJC,65)

Clare's poetry is mercifully free from the ornamentation of Erasmus Darwin's The Temple of Nature (1803), but Darwin's sense of Nature as God's "terrene abode" (I,223-4) is among the many influences on Clare.⁹⁰ Clare describes

⁹⁰ Clare possessed a copy of The Temple of Nature by 1824 (see Powell; op. cit., note 15 above; p. 26), and evidently enjoyed it (see Letters; Tibble, 1951; p. 224). Darwin was a late convert to the Religion of Nature, but other naturalists, notably John Ray and Gilbert White, had pointed the way. E.J. Bush has referred to Clare as a "priest of nature" (Bush; op. cit., note 2 above; p. 244).

birds' eggs not only with oological accuracy, but also with a feeling of wonder at their "mystic" inscriptions (see PJC,II,491; cf. SPP,70). The same "mystic power" is shared by flowers, determining the precise markings and characertistics of each individual species (see SPP, 111-12). Since every part of Creation bears the stamp of its Creator, scenes of natural beauty may quite properly be termed "divine" (see e.g. PJC,II,15 and 315), and even the most humble of sights may be described as "half divine" (SC,113). The grandeur and mystery of the lofty stars "speak a Deity" (PJC,I,237), while the simplicity and familiarity of the pastoral plains evince "A power divine" (PJC,II,261).

Such sentiments as these, as Moore remarks, were not encouraged by the Church because of their tendency towards a denial of the need for the revelation of God afforded by Christ, but so long as poets refrained from actually communing with God through Nature they were on reasonably safe ground. If Clare forsakes the safe ground, Janet Todd contends, then he does so only in the occasional moments of "wavering" in his beliefs, and his "book of Nature" is not allowed to become "a Christian allegory of God". It seems to me, however, that Clare's belief in the transcendent Deity, instead of making God aloof from Nature, rather affirms the notion of an eternal power which is capable of perpetuating Clare's private Eden. For Clare mundane Nature is an "allegory" of God by

virtue of its replication of paradise — there is no metaphysical reality without physical reality, no spiritual vision without ocular vision.

And he who studies natures volume through
 And reads it with a pure unselfish mind
 Will find Gods power all round in every view
 As one bright vision of the almighty mind
 His eyes are open though the world is blind ...
 (LPJC, 36)

If one desires more specific "allegory" than this, then one might consider the lilies of the field,

The Scripture truths of every soil,
 Field flowers that never spin or toil.
 (PJC, II, 436)

"Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field ... shall he not much more clothe you?" (Matthew, VI: 30).

The fact that God uses the lilies to teach Man a lesson means that many of the "little pictures" which Clare sees in the landscape may be interpreted as "bible pictures" (SPP, 81). The flowers themselves are Nature's "very scriptures upon earth" (CSPP, 255),⁹¹ and Spring is hailed as "Scripture of the year!" (PJC, II, 436). Mindful, perhaps, of God's promise that he cares even for the

⁹¹ The moral of the flowers is used again in the asylum poem "Trust in Providence" (PJC, II, 462), but Mrs. Tibble has recently disclosed that this poem is unlikely to be Clare's, and that it was probably written by another asylum inmate (see Times Literary Supplement, 10 May 1974, 502-3). Certainly the very Thomsonian diction makes it suspect, since Clare's style was much more his own by the 1840's. Another poem from the same manuscript, "The Praise of God" (PJC, II, 461), is not by Clare and was included in J.L. Cherry's 1873 collection "inadvertently", and equally inadvertently printed by J.W. Tibble in 1935.

sparrows (see Matthew,X: 29), Clare notes that "The god of nature" guides the flight of the lark, "For God loves little larks as well / As man or beast" (LPJC,173), and he uses this exemplar even to chastise Man's pride:

Man goes by art to foreign lands
 With shipwreck and decay;
 Birds go with Nature for their guide,
 And GOD directs their way ... (PJCM,60)

Birds, flowers, fields, and woods not only yield their own beauty, but also serve to teach the observer of God's love and concern. They are "Real teachers that are all divine / ... They are my aids to worship still" (SPP,120). God's every creature is "pregnant with his prophecy" and "upbraideth man" for his selfishness (JCSP,191).

If Nature is to upbraid, exhort, or inspire Man, she needs to have a voice, and there are many ways in which Clare has made Nature articulate. At times he simply hears "a voice in trees and flowers" (SC,41), or feels the mind-restoring powers of trees that "Whisper and talk to every wind which stirs" (PJCM,205), but sometimes it is the muse who speaks, "As if commending what I sung to thee" (JCSP,131), and sometimes

A spirit speaks in every wind,
 And gives the storm its wings;
 With thee all nature owns a mind,
 And stones are living things ... (PJC,I,448)

The voice which speaks in the storm, in the poem which I quoted at the end of chapter one, is "The very voice of God" (LPJC,229), and the voice of God is heard again in "Impulses of Spring" as the music of the lyre (see PJC,I, 432). Another storm and another lyre appear in "Pastoral

Poesy":

And now a harp that flings around
 The music of the wind;
 The poet often hears the sound
 When beauty fills the mind. (JCSP, 187)⁹²

And what if all of animated nature be but organic harps
 diversely fram'd ... ? Clare does not ask this question
 in so many words, but he does come back to "the Music of
 Nature" in one of his later sonnets so titled:

Children-like insects dancing in the sun;
 Bees like the busy crowds in labour's power;
 Rainfalls shed music in the drops that run
 Out from the brimful spring and wet each flower,
 Bending its features downward, like a nun
 Musing upon her shadow, by the light
 That makes the surface glass-like and conveys
 Reflection; dimpling streams give music bright
 To hushing showers, as echoes of sweet praise
 And instances of thought in wisdom's ways;
 The great Orion and the Pleiades
 Pervade the spheres and thrones celestial crowned,
 And all ascensive nature, by degrees,
 Is omnipresent with melodious sound. (PJC, II, 309)

Sara Fricker might well bestow "a mild reproof" once again
 with her "more serious eye", but Clare has in fact
 redeemed his pantheistic tendencies in line 9, in which the
 music of the earth and of the spheres is described as
 "sweet praise", implying the existence of a transcendent
 God. Similarly in the early poem "Sunday Walks" the poet
 expresses delight

⁹² On the wind and harp as recurrent images in Romantic
 poetry see M.H. Abrams, "The Correspondent Breeze:
 A Romantic Metaphor" in Kenyon Review, 19, 1957,
 113-30.

In seeking sweets of solitary joy,
 And lessons learning from a simple tongue,
 Where nature preaches in a cricket's song;
 Where every tiny thing that flies and creeps
 Some feeble language owns, its prayer to raise;
 Where all that lives, by noise or silence, keeps
 A homely sabbath in its Maker's praise.

(PJC, I, 217)

To the theology of an Eden that bespeaks a transcendent God we may add from the evidence of these lines Clare's belief in an interaction between God and Nature, which is akin to the empathic communication between Nature and Man. God animates, sustains, and converses with Nature, which relays His presence to Man and responds to God with praise. The cricket, thus, not only "preaches" to Man as God's medium, but also raises a "prayer" of gratitude. Nature receives God's blessing, and "Nature 'turns God thanks" (JCSP, 286). This interaction reminds us once more of Coleridge:

so shalt thou see and hear
 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
 Of that eternal language, which thy God
 Utters, who from eternity doth teach
 Himself in all, and all things in himself,
 Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
 Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

("Frost at Midnight",
 58-64)

Clare's access to God, however, if only marginally dependent on orthodox Scripture, is not wholly confined to Nature's "sounds intelligible". In the lines from "Sunday Walks" quoted above he notes that all things declare their God whether "by noise or silence", and in one of his asylum letters he recalls his solitary boyhood walks, "communing with God & not a word spoken."⁹³ John

⁹³ Letters (Tibbels, 1951), p. 298.

Hollander has found evidences of a silence which is more than just the absence of sound in Wordsworth, Shelley, Poe, Hölderlin, and Valéry,⁹⁴ but the finest example is surely the celebration of God's "powerful language" in the first book of Thomson's Seasons:

What is this mighty breath, ye curious, say,
That in a powerful language, felt, not heard,
Instructs the fowls of heaven, and through their breast
These arts of love diffuses? What, but God?
Inspiring God! who, boundless spirit all
And unremitting energy, pervades,
Adjusts, sustains, and agitates the whole.

(Seasons, I, 849-55)

This language "felt, not heard" not only belongs to God but is reciprocated by Man in his most reverent meditations:

Come then, expressive Silence, muse his praise.
("A Hymn on the
Seasons", 118)

In the poem which Janet Todd regards as evidence of a wavering of belief in God's transcendence, "The Voice of Nature", Clare affirms the Thomsonian creed:

There is a language wrote on earth and sky
By God's own pen in silent majesty;
There is a voice that's heard and felt and seen
In spring's young shades and summer's endless green ...
There is a page in which that voice aloud
Speaks music to the few and not the crowd;
Though no romantic scenes my feet have trod,
The voice of nature as the voice of God
Appeals to me in every tree and flower,
Breathing his glory, magnitude and power.

(JCSP, 184-5)

Paradoxically this silent language is "heard and felt and seen", and Clare makes further play on these words:

⁹⁴ John Hollander, "The Music of Silence" in Prose, 7, 1973, 79-91.

I pause, and hear a voice that speaks aloud:
 'Tis not on earth nor in the thundercloud;
 The many look for sound — 'tis silence speaks,
 And song like sunshine from her rapture breaks.
 I hear it in my bosom ever near;
 'Tis in these winds, and they are everywhere.
 It casts around my vision magic spells
 And makes earth heaven where poor fancy dwells.
 (JCSP, 185)

As if to convey the omnipresence of God, Clare has used such synaesthetic phrases as "look for sound", "silence speaks", and "I hear it in my bosom",⁹⁵ and there may even be an allusion to his favourite symbol of the sun's liberation from the "rapture" (bondage) of the clouds, which parallels the liberation of silence from the "rapture" (ecstatic expression) of song. Paradoxical language is used for the same purpose in "Pastoral Poesy":

And whether it be hill or moor,
 I feel where'er I go
 A silence that discourses more
 Than any tongue can do ... (JCSP, 186)⁹⁶

and in "The Robin's Nest" this silence is the discourse of a "superior power",

That speaks in spots where all things silent be
 In words not heard but felt ... (SPP, 92)⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Cf. Clare's apprehension of the thrush's song: "I drank the sound / With joy" (PJC, II, 245).

⁹⁶ JCSP, 186 (following PJC, II, 50) reads "That" for "Than" in the last line of this stanza, and this has not been corrected in the paperback edition of 1973 (cf. a misprint in "Love's Story" (JCSP, 313), which is corrected in the paperback). "Than" seems a more logical reading.

⁹⁷ Cf. "Silence is music ere the birds will sing" (LPJC, 105) and "All nature has a feeling wood brooks fields / Are life eternal — and in silence they / Speak happiness ... " (LPJC, 134). Cf. also Byron's *Childe Harold*, III, st. 89, and the "eternal Silence" of Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode", line 155.

For the significance of God's silent language we must recall the notion of the earthly paradise. In the lines from "The Voice of Nature" quoted above, the poet's vision or "fancy" is credited with a power that "makes earth heaven", and there is an obvious parallel here with the references which I made in chapter three to the power of the poet's faculties to evoke "The Eden of earth's happiness", to render "past and present all as one", and to gain "a look in Heaven before its time." One of the possible interpretations of the tenth of Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" — "Eternity is in love with the productions of time" — is that the eternal life after death will recreate some of the conditions of the physical Earth, and accordingly, in Keats's words, "we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated."⁹⁸ In a very real sense, therefore, eternal life is already given to mortal things, and it is the function of the poet's vision to perceive vestiges of Heaven on Earth. This paradox of vision is not recognized by Janet Todd:

On the whole, when Clare deals with God at all, he seems to conceive of Him as outside nature. He is so in "Nature's Hymn to the Deity" ([PJC,] II, 83), where all parts of nature proclaim that God is with them, not of them. Also, the designation of God in this poem as "the first link in the mighty plan" seems to reveal a transcendent or ordering God rather than a Wordsworthian immanent and transcendent God. The separation is reinforced implicitly in Clare's conception of eternity that is both in

⁹⁸ Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 Nov. 1817, in ed. cit. (see note 25 above), vol. I, p. 185.

time and timeless; where nature's is the former, God's is, of course, the latter.⁹⁹

I have already shown that Clare's God is the Sustainer as well as the "first link", and I have implied that the difference between transcendence and immanence is of less importance than the difference between theism and deism, between a God who actively reveals Himself in Nature and a God who remains loftily detached. Because his God is undeniably transcendent and yet chooses to cast aside the veil (or rend it in twain) and manifest Himself in common objects, it seems to me that Clare would not be willing or able to separate the "eternity that is both in time and timeless", apportioning the former to Nature and the latter to God. Clare holds that earthly beauty is not only created by God but is empowered to "employ / ... The mind in shaping heavens / As one continued joy" (PJC, II, 286) and may therefore be described as "the type of heaven above" (PJC, I, 415), reflecting God's sunny glory and "Making earth heaven in our fancy's dream" (PJC, II, 107). In "Child Harold" Clare proclaims:

⁹⁹ Todd, monograph (see note 51 above), p. 41. In her dissertation, however, (see note 46 above), Dr. Todd remarks of the God of Clare's later poems: "Although still the transcendent, unknowable creator He has been throughout Clare's verse, God is now immanent in the world" (p. 203). E.J. Bush is imprecise on this point, finding that Clare "leaps beyond the limitations of reality" and glimpses God, and also that he shares "the eighteenth-century and Romantic vision of the imminence [sic] of God in nature." (Bush; op. cit., note 2 above; pp. 347-8). L.J. Masson is clearer: "As his poetry progresses, he does not abandon his belief in the Christians' God, but he does begin to discover meaning, the meaning of nature and of himself, that grows from a personal experience of nature and God through nature." (Masson; op. cit., note 4 above; p. 81.)

I love thee nature in my inmost heart
 Go where I will thy truth seems from above
 Go where I will thy landscape forms a part
 Of heaven ...

(LPJC,47)¹⁰⁰

In such a landscape God's silent language imparts hope and love — raindrops "come from heaven and there the Free / Sends down his blessings upon me" (PJC,II,409), and dewdrops adorn the fields "As if the Heaven was looking through" (LPJC,263). In such a landscape even snails and skylarks and sunsets weave their "visions" (see CSPP,169; PJC,II,294,304). One sunset, on 22 July 1844, prompted these lines:

The cool of evening is the hour of Heaven:
 The time Earth holds communion with the sky,
 When angels' thoughts to evening walks are given,
 And whispering in the hedges round us lie,
 Like Heaven talking in our infancy ...

(PJCM,124)

and other asylum verses also declare that Heaven is omnipresent to the poetic mind:

The healthfull [sic] mind that muses and inhales
 The green eyed dews of morning finds his way
 To paradise Gods choice self planted vales ...

(LPJC,151)

¹⁰⁰ Byron's Childe Harold also evokes images of Heaven on Earth in canto III, lines 449, 508, and 598, and canto IV, stanza 27. Wordsworth in The Recluse describes the Vale of Grasmere as the "earthly counterpart" of the "ethereal vault" (641-2). A characteristic statement of Clare's belief is his sonnet on "Nature" in which he describes Nature as

The warmth that cherishes eternity,
 A joy that triumphs o'er the world's rude strife,
 A hope that pictures what the next may be.

(PJC,II,118)

This contrasts with his earlier sonnet on "Life" in which he declares of this world that:

Tho' some there live would call thee heaven below,
 But that's a nickname I've not learn'd to know ...

(PJC,I,130)

Hope and love are the fruits of a communion with a Nature which, though sometimes celebrated for her impartiality,¹⁰¹ may yet accord an "influence that so calms / The weary mind" (CSPP,184) and restores "The soul to harmony the mind to love" (LPJC,80).

The lake that held a mirror to the sun
Now curves with wrinkles in the stillest place
The autumn wind sounds hollow as a gun
And water stands in every swampy place
Yet in these fens peace harmony and grace
The attributes of nature are alied [sic] (LPJC,63)

If Nature has this benevolent influence even in dismal weather, then her moral and spiritual stimulation is so much the greater when the sun is in force:

Hill-tops like hot iron glitter bright in the sun,
And the rivers we're eying burn to gold as they run;
Burning hot is the ground, liquid gold is the air;
Whoever looks round sees Eternity there.
(JCSP,305)

Because Eternity is already manifest to Man in this life, Nature's providential care is also available in mundane existence. "Providence", we learn, is responsible for guarding the nests of birds and the forms of hares (see PJC,I,523 and PJC,II,245), just as it supplies the food

¹⁰¹"Impartiality" both in the sense of regeneration of all species regardless of size or importance, and of equality of favour (and presumably of disfavour) towards all living creatures. For examples of the former see PJC,I,522; SPP,109-12; CSPP,201. The latter sense is apparent in Clare's personification of Spring:

The meanest thing that lives to crawl or flye
Has equal claims in Her impartial eye.

Obscure & mean as they may seem to some

She always finds a pathway to their home.

(Printed by Richmond; appendix to op. cit., note 5 above; p. 235.)

There is also "impartial rain" in the sonnet "Field Thoughts" (PJC,II,307). Cf. Thomson: "The kind impartial care / Of Nature naught disdains" (Seasons II,1660-1).

and drink of Man (see PJC,II,16) and calms his anxious fears (see PJC,II,304). This calming influence is emphasised in the sonnet "Peaceful Scenes" (see PJC,II,329), and in "Child Harold" Providence is hailed as "That Grand Eternal Calm" which attends Man's life "Like The Sunshine In The Sky" (LPJC,71).¹⁰² In one of his prose fragments Clare personifies Providence as an "attendant

¹⁰² God calms the storm in "The Mother's Lullaby" (PJC,II 178), but in an earlier poem "On an Infant Killed by Lightning" the "dread storm" and the child's death are rather callously explained in the words: "Thus Providence will oft appear / From God's own mouth to preach" (PJC,II,93). According to "Summer Evening", Providence's "end and aim is doing good" (CSPP,61), and this is certainly the case in "Child Harold" where Man is saved from a storm "And walks unhurt while danger seems so nigh" (LPJC,62), just as in Thomson's "Winter" Providence steers the storm-tossed ships to safety (see Seasons,IV,1020-23). In "Lines written on a very Boisterous Day in May, 1844", however, although the poet finds shelter, the ships are not so fortunate:

... and 'tis He
Who walks the sea, and drives the ships away
From anchor into wrecks! (PJCM,119)

An influence on these lines may well be the concluding stanzas of Byron's Childe Harold, IV, where Byron exults in the turbulence of the ocean — "The wrecks are all thy deed" (IV, st. 179). Byron's ocean is sometimes "The image of Eternity" (IV, st. 183), sometimes a great, impersonal, destructive force. E.J. Lovell writes: "One feels that Byron was almost obsessed by the idea of a deity who has the relation of Creator-Destroyer to the physical universe." (Lovell, Byron — The Record of a Quest; Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1966; p. 214). Clare's Nature is rarely hostile, sometimes impartial (see note 101 above), and nearly always benevolent. "Out of doors we see nothing but pleasure and good" (PJCM,116).

deity":

I feel a beautiful providence ever about me as
my attendant deity she casts her mantle about
me when I am in trouble to shield me from it
She attends me like a nurse when I am in sick-
ness ... she attends to my every weakness when
I am doubting like a friend ... & when my faith
is sinking into despondency she opens her mind¹⁰³
as a teacher to show me truth & give me wisdom

The idea of Nature as a "nurse" or "teacher", as a moral guardian who fosters Man's growth and tutors his conscience, had been propounded in the eighteenth century by Shaftesbury and Hartley and gradually found favour in popular literature, reaching its highest expression in Wordsworth. In 1851 E.P. Hood found in Wordsworth and Clare "the same power to reflect back a lesson, and to treat Nature in all her visible manifestations as an intimation and a prophecy",¹⁰⁴ and at times we even find in Clare the Wordsworthian admixture of "delight and fear" in Nature's presence (see PJC, II, 308). Wordsworth's Nature is "the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being" ("Tintern Abbey", 109-11), and to Clare She is a "tender nurse" (PJC, I, 520), with a "mother's voice" and a "mother's breast" (JCSP, 327 and PJCM, 122), who teaches "That peace and health is liberty" (LPJC, 128). Nature's teachings have a moral and spiritual mission "to humble the pride of

¹⁰³ Prose (Tibbles, 1951), p. 226.

¹⁰⁴ E.P. Hood, The Literature of Labour (London: Part-ridge, 1851), pp. 128-64; Storey p. 265.

man — every trifle also has a lesson to bespeak the wisdom & forethought of the Deity."¹⁰⁵

The meanest trifles we behold
A way to wisdom leads
Some moral truths they will unfold
Which wisdom only reads ... (106)

Every tree and flower "Becomes a monitor to teach and bless" (SPP,92), and through their agency "the hearts better mood / Feels sick of doing ill" (CSPP,168).

For all the comforting logic of such sentiments it would be foolish to maintain that Clare has assiduously followed any such model of divinization as I have outlined in this chapter, and naturally he does not always arrive at such cheerfully reassuring conclusions. It would be foolish also to ignore the fact that many of Clare's analogies between Nature and Man or between Nature and God are forced and false, productive of clumsy abstractions and of trite moralizing. Nevertheless it is apparent that Clare, like Wordsworth, experiences different phases of imaginative awareness which, as James Benziger says, may be "somewhat arbitrarily designated" as "perception of the vital, perception of the beautiful, and perception of the sublime."¹⁰⁷ The fact that Clare, in very many poems,

¹⁰⁵ Prose (Tibble, 1951), p. 184.

¹⁰⁶ Printed by Chapple, op. cit. (see note 37 above), p. 44.

¹⁰⁷ Such is the process of divinization which Benziger ascribes to Wordsworth (Benziger; op. cit., note 7 above; chapter ii), though with the caution that: "As a matter of biographical fact these were not entirely distinct from each other chronologically or qualitatively" (p. 31).

is prepared to endow Nature with sentient life and with moral and religious significance places him firmly in the Romantic tradition,¹⁰⁸ and not, as Paul Schwaber fatuously argues, in some movement ahead of his time:

The 'new nature poetry,' as Robert Langbaum has shown, reveals 'the mindlessness of nature, its nonhuman otherness.' It resists — as does Clare's — the temptation openly to project human feelings into natural objects; and it denies — as does Clare's — the assumption that nature can beneficently restore us to our best humanity by nourishing our deepest feelings.¹⁰⁹

Shelley once remarked in a letter to Peacock: "You know I always seek in what I see the manifestation of something beyond the present & tangible object ... "¹¹⁰ and in the case of Clare the thing sought is a foretaste of immortality, an assurance of permanence in the midst of flux, a communication with God through Nature.

Clare's search for God, as I suggested earlier in this chapter, met with no very certain answers, just as his search for literary fame and domestic security went largely unrewarded. In the words of the psalmist Clare found an expression of his own experience of the ways of

¹⁰⁸ M.H. Abrams observes that: "The habit of reading passion, life, and physiognomy into the landscape is one of the few salient attributes common to most of the major romantic poets." (Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp; New York: Oxford University Press, 1953; p. 55.)

¹⁰⁹ Paul Schwaber, "Stays Against Confusion: the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 27 (1967), 1794A (Columbia); microfilm pp. 172-3. The reference to Langbaum is to his article "The New Nature Poetry" in The American Scholar, 28, 1959, 324.

¹¹⁰ Shelley to Peacock, 6 Nov. 1818, in F.L. Jones, ed., The Letters of P.B. Shelley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), vol. II, p. 47.

the Lord:

But thou hast held me up awhile
And thou hast cast me down ... (LPJC,161)

While there is "a calm divinity of joy" in Nature,¹¹¹ when "bursts of happiness from heaven fall" (PJC,II,307), there is also in Clare's experience a measure of "mental agony: / Till even life itself becomes all pain ... " (JCSP,299). The reverent mood of Clare's prayer for temperance, humility, and honesty (see PJC,II,102-3) must be juxtaposed with his asylum cry: "[I've] long been sick of teasing God with prayers" (LPJC,87). Despite his admission to Taylor in 1823 that "doubts & unbelief perplex me continually & now I think seriously about an hereafter I am more troubl'd in my thoughts than [i.e. than] I was before",¹¹² he was able to tell him a year later:

my opinion Taylor of true Religion amounts to this if a man turns to God with real sincerity of heart not of canting & creeping to the eyes of the world but satisfying his own conscience so that it shall not upbraid him in the last hours of life ... that man in my opinion is as certain of heaven in the next world as he is of death in this¹¹³

¹¹¹ From "Pleasures of Spring" in Richmond, appendix to op. cit. (see note 5 above), p. 230.

¹¹² Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 146. On the strength of the occasional comment of this nature Janet Todd concludes that Clare "vacillates in his belief in a compensatory afterlife, but, on the whole, he seems to have denied it, just as he usually denies any soteriological system." (Todd; monograph, note 51 above; p. 82.) Even with the qualifications "on the whole" and "usually" these conclusions do not seem to me to tally with the evidence of the poems.

¹¹³ Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 160.

In 1830 he confirmed that: "As to religion my mind is compleatly at rest in that matter",¹¹⁴ and even at Northborough he could write a poem on the life and example of Jesus, "The God, the Saviour from on high" (PJC,II,276). Ten years later, however, we find him confined to a madhouse, tormented by abandonment,

Left in the world alone
Where nothing seems my own,
And everything is weariness to me,
'Tis a life without an end,
'Tis a world without a friend,
And everything is sorrowful I see. (PJC,II,522)

His very last letter is a pathetic note to an inquirer from the outside world:

Dear Sir

I am in a Madhouse & quite forget your Name
or who you are You must excuse me for I have
nothing to communicate or tell of & why I
am shut up I dont know I have nothing to say
so I conclude

Yours respectfully
John Clare¹¹⁵

Clare's asylum poems are burdened with regrets, doubts, and unfulfilled desires, all of which tend to undermine his faith in, but increase his desire for, the sanctuary of Eternity. To his beloved Mary he confides that "heaven itself without thy face / To me would be no resting place" (LPJC,45), and to another sweetheart he avows: "Heaven loves near thee"¹¹⁶ / Tis hell to be parted thus" (LPJC,246).

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 249.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 309.

¹¹⁶ i.e. "Heaven, love, is near thee".

The warmth of human affection, Clare comes to realize, is the one thing missing from the "Immortal harmony of Nature's love" (PJCM,193).

I sigh for truth and home and love and woman ...
(LPJC,41)

and since "Love lies beyond / The tomb" (JCSP,290) perhaps Clare sighs most of all for easeful death, death which "would bring me happiness" (LPJC,42).

Death for Clare, is a means of release from the bondage of Time, a key with which Man may unlock the mortal prison-house and experience the liberation of Eternity. "The world with all its fascinations," he writes, "would become by time the most gloomy prison if death did not bring us the means of escaping from it."¹¹⁷ A reviewer observed in 1932 that: "One peculiar philosophic idea runs through Clare's writings, namely that nature and childhood are unaware of decay, and therefore eternity is timelessness. In his years of sanity, no less than when he had lost hold of what we call reality, he felt that nothing ever ends and time is an illusion."¹¹⁸ The truth is rather that although Time reigns supreme over earthly life, its tyranny is overcome by the sleep of death,

Leaving eternity to keep the key
Till judgment sets all hopes and terrors free.
(PJC,II,98)

¹¹⁷ Prose (Tibbles, 1951), p. 228.

¹¹⁸ G.M. Harper in Saturday Review of Literature, 31 Dec. 1932, 352.

Clare's millenarianism sometimes seems at odds with his belief in the eternity of Eden, since the Judgment traditionally involves a return to an apparent chaos in the transformation of the old order into the new,¹¹⁹ but he is unwilling to admit of immortality without the prerequisite of doomsday. One must earn one's "passport for eternity" (PJC,II,207).¹²⁰ For those who are saved the hereafter holds the prospect of "endless happiness without a pain" (PJC,I,266):

So do I turn my weary eyes above,
 So do I look and sigh for peace to come,
 So do I long the grave's dark end to prove,
 And anxious wait my long, long journey home.
(PJC,I,127)

119 See PJC,I,399-408 and LPJC, 104-5, 108-9. E.J. Bush traces the millenarian strain in Clare back to Bunyan (see Bush; op. cit., note 2 above; pp. 35-8 and 109-12) and comments that after writing his apocalyptic poems Clare "recoils in dread from the 'terrible things' that he has created, discovering that they leave a 'disrelish' for nature, for they mock the permanence of that vision to which he, as a pastoral poet, has wedded himself" (p. 226). Certainly Clare is not always enthusiastic about "death's dark, sealed, impenetrable cloud" (PJC,I,530). In "Life, Death, and Eternity" (PJC,I,411) Life is characterized as "A wish for joys that never come" and Death as "A dark, inevitable night, / A blank that will remain ... " The poem is relieved by the prospect of Eternity, "A morning whose uprisen sun / No setting e'er shall see."

120 Cf. "whoso righteous lives shall win eternity" (PJC,II, 200), and reference to "worth's well won eternity" in a poem printed by D.B. Green, op. cit. (see note 68 above), p. 89. The phrase "a passport ... to heaven" occurs in an early poem (PJC,I,218), but a variant of this is used satirically in "The Parish", in which Justice Terror gives out presents "No doubt as toll fees on the road to heaven" (JCSP,156).

"Home", as I have shown, is nothing more or less than Northamptonshire in the sky, an earthly model of Eden replicated in eternity. Reclining in the woodland shade Clare affirms: "the thought of death is sweet / In shaping heaven to a scene like this" (PJC, I, 519); or sauntering in the noonday sun he declares:

Another Summer still my eyes can see
 Freed from the scorn and pilgrimage of woe,
 To share the Seasons of Eternity. (PJC, I, 125)

Whether Clare's "relish for eternity" (PJC, I, 522) is finally a philosophy of "shrinking retreatism" — a "dead end" as E.J. Bush says¹²¹ — or a triumphant vision of permanence, must be left to the sympathy and judgment of the individual reader. I hope at least to have defended Clare from the charge of having no thoughts,¹²² and to have shown that his quest for a religious faith has integrity and depth. If he is prone to gloominess about this life, it must be admitted that his lot was singularly unfortunate. The miracle is that, like Christopher Smart, he managed to proclaim hope and joy even in the midst of apathy and despair:

Born an immortal soul that cannot die
 To nothing, nor yet be nothing:
 That soul is Man, born not of the dust
 Nor yet to dust returns, but born of God,
 Eternal as his Sire, living for ever
 An immortal Soul. (PJCM, 192)

"Clare's is in any ordinary sense a sad life," writes Graham Hough, "but we cannot read of it, or read his poems,

¹²¹ Bush, op. cit. (see note 2 above), p. 161.

¹²² See above, p. 32.

without feeling that the dominant note is a very rare kind of happiness after all."¹²³ Though homeless, friendless, and without recognition as a poet, Clare still insists:

Yet Love Lives On In Every Kind Of Weather
In Heat And Cold In Sunshine And In Gloom

(LPJC, 74)

My penultimate chapter will discuss the importance of this Love, its relevance to the past and to Nature, and its culmination in the divinization of Woman.

¹²³ Spectator, 29 May 1964, 729.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE DIVINIZATION OF WOMAN

"But, though I worshipped stocks and stones,
 'Twas Woman everywhere." (PJCM, 62)

One of Clare's very earliest poems has as its narrator a young maiden who has been left inconsolable by the loss of her lover and who can no longer respond to the gaiety of spring. It is a conventional poem of the pastoral kind in which amorous swains dance round the maypole while the linnet sings on high; but the conventional merriment of the scene is clouded by the narrator's sorrow:

And May no more shall e'er restore
 To me those joys again,
 There's no relief but urging grief,
 For memory wakens pain. (PJC, I, 44)

In the following forty years of his career Clare was to write as many as two thousand poems, but the voice of melancholy which speaks in this stanza echoes through his later work. In earlier chapters I have examined the tension in Clare's poetry between the ideal, represented by "Eden" and "Eternity", and the actual, typified by enclosure and social ills, and his constant weighing of idealized love against the reality of loneliness may be regarded as another manifestation of the same contrariety. Just as the happiness of childhood and of the unspoiled landscape belong to a time which has passed away, so the rapture of first love has been reduced to the memory of a fleeting moment:

Now is past — the happy now
 When we together roved
 Beneath the wildwood's oak-tree bough
 And nature said we loved.
 Winter's blast
 The now since then has crept between,
 And left us both apart.
 Winters that withered all the green
 Have froze the beating heart.
Now is past.

(PJC,II,503)

The association of idyllic love with lost youth is habitual in Clare, and the recollection of those carefree days, as we have seen in chapter three, elicits from the poet a "joy like a pain" (SPP,40). In the long poem "The Enthusiast: A Daydream in Summer" (JCSP,115-20) Clare at first recounts a richly nostalgic vision of his fairy-tale childhood, then progresses to the "pleasant pain" of adolescence. His beloved Mary clings to his arm, her face like that of an angel; together they wander through an enchanted evening landscape, and the poet's mood reaches such a peak of happiness that suddenly "Joy seemed too happy to be true":

And instant as that thought begun
 Her presence seemed his love to shun,
 And deaf to all he had to say
 Quick turned her tender face away;
 When her small waist he strove to clasp,
 She shrunk like water from his grasp.

(JCSP,120)

This poignant playing-off of fantasy against fact, this almost masochistic deflation of ecstasy, is a familiar pattern in Clare's poetry — titles like "Love and Memory" (CSPP,81), "First Loves Recollections" (CSPP,86), "When I was young" (LPJC,219), "First Love" (JCSP,323), and "Early Love" (PJC,II,501) are by themselves a fair indication of his continuing preoccupation with his earliest experiences of the vagaries of courtship. The biographical background

of such poems has so often been explored¹ that I shall not retell the story here in detail, but the essential facts may be briefly summarized.

Clare met Mary Joyce, the blue-eyed daughter of a Glinton farmer, when he was about twelve years old and she only eight, and as playmates they grew together in what Clare calls "a romantic or Platonic sort of feeling."² When Clare left day-school the relationship was broken off, but at the age of sixteen he met her again and the two enjoyed a year's companionship until Mary, or possibly her father, decided that the difference between their social positions was too great.³ Clare, naturally, was

¹ See especially J.W. and Anne Tibble, John Clare, A Life (revised edn., London: Michael Joseph, 1972), pp. 19-22, 46-7, 77-8, 94, 196, 307-11, 331, 348-58; Paul Schwaber, "Stays Against Confusion: the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 27 (1967), 1794A (Columbia), microfilm pp. 42-3, 200-1; M.G. Minor, "The Poet in his Joy: a critical study of John Clare's poetical development," D.A., 31 (1971), 4784A (Ohio State), microfilm pp. 66-8, 77-81, 84-6, 186-90, 319, 396-8; E.J. Bush, "The Poetry of John Clare," D.A., 32 (1971), 3295A (Wisconsin), microfilm pp. 210-22, 260-5, 298-302; L.J. Masson, "The Fearful Vision: the poetry of John Clare," D.A., 33 (1972), 279A (Syracuse), chapter 4; and Janet M. Todd, "In Adam's Garden: a study of John Clare," D.A., 33 (1972), 768A (Florida), chapter 4. The main primary sources are Edmund Blunden, ed., Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), pp. 86-7, and J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Prose of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), pp. 44, 64, 248-50.

² Prose (Tibble, 1951; see note 1 above), p. 44.

³ John Middleton Murry in his essay "Clare Revisited" in Unprofessional Essays (London: Cape, 1956), pp. 55-111, notes that the enclosure of Helpstone meant that "Mary's father went further up in the world, Clare's went further down. ... The loss of the freedom of the open-fields by enclosure and the loss of Mary may have been in fact, and not merely in Clare's creative imagination, a single happening" (p. 89).

brokenhearted, but years passed and new lovers claimed his affections, and as far as is known he caught sight of Mary only twice again (in 1816 and 1821). His somewhat reluctant marriage to Martha ("Patty") Turner took place in 1820, and his hopes of winning Mary's hand were finally terminated. By the time Mary died (aged forty-one and unmarried) in 1838, Clare had written dozens of ballads and songs commemorating their springtime of love and bewailing their estrangement, and as his mental illness increased he fell more and more under the delusion that Mary was his "first wife". From the asylum he pours out letters and poems to her — "almost every song I write has some sighs or wishes in Ink about Mary"⁴ — and infers that his imprisonment is a punishment for bigamy. Mary passes through the phases of being his childhood playmate, his adolescent sweetheart, his imaginary wife, the guardian angel of his dreams, the absent lover of his fantasies, until finally her name stands for idealized and idolized Woman.

Even without the autobiographical information which Clare gives us in his prose jottings, there is much that we could glean from the poems themselves. The asylum verses in particular persistently analyse the poet's past experience in order to account for his present predicament:

I hid my love when young while⁵ I
 Coudn't bear the buzzing of a flye
 I hid my love to my despite
 Till I could not bear to look at light

⁴ J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Letters of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 295.

⁵ "while" here means "until".

I dare not gaze upon her face
 But left her memory in each place
 Where ere I saw a wild flower lye
 I kissed and bade my love good bye (CSPP,226)

We learn that he met his love in the spring of youth (see LPJC,74); that the pouting of her lip and the colour of her hair "Left me in raptures next of kin to care" (LPJC, 145); that against his will they parted, leaving only a hope that "we shall meet agen" (LPJC,46);⁶ and that now, in his declining years, he longs to recreate "Loves temple in the field" (LPJC,194). Far more than his actual wife it is Mary for whom he pines when confined at High Beech:

No ray of hope my life beguiles
 I've lost love home and Mary (LPJC,38)⁷

⁶ In the poem "How Can I Forget?" (JCSP,324) Clare recalls that his lover said "Farewell" and walked away in silence — the parting may have come as a surprise to him, "Loved but one moment, and the next alone." An early ballad to Mary which repeats the words "Fare thee well" as a refrain seems to have been written on the occasion of his last sight of Mary in 1821 (see Letters; Tibble, 1951; p. 123 — PJC,II mistakenly puts this poem amongst the work of 1824-32). Robinson and Summerfield published a "Valentine — To Mary" in 1966 (see CSPP,84), but supplied no date.

⁷ When Clare escaped from High Beech in 1841, walking more than eighty miles in four days, it was in order to find Mary at Northborough. At the end of the journey he was met by his wife, whom he did not recognize: "a cart met me with a man and woman and a boy in it when nearing me the woman jumped out and caught fast hold of my hands and wished me to get into the cart but I refused and thought her either drunk or mad but when I was told it was my second wife Patty I got in and was soon at Northborough but Mary was not there neither could I get any information about her further then [i.e. than] the old story of her being dead six years ago ... but I took no notice of the blarney having seen her myself about a twelve month ago alive and well and as young as ever ..." (CSPP,216). For reference in the poems to his "two wives" see LPJC, 40, 41, 77, 89, 92. Patty comes into her own in a number of love poems — see JCSP, 238 and 317; LPJC,73; PJCM,61; and earlier pieces in PJC,I,281 and JCSP,188. John Heath-Stubbs has referred to Mary and Martha as "the ideal and the

There is "No single hour", he declares in "Child Harold",
 "But calenders [sic] a aching thought / Of my first lonely
 love" (LPJC, 51). First love's wounds might heal, "but
 still the heart is aching" (LPJC, 78). At Northampton
 Asylum the heartache persists, but other names begin to
 vie with Mary's until the poet himself becomes confused by
 their multiplicity.⁸ To one he writes:

Black absence hides upon the past,
 I quite forget thy face;
 And memory like the angry blast
 Will love's last smile erase.
 I try to think of what has been,
 But all is blank to me;
 And other faces pass between
 My early love and thee. (JCSP, 295)

workaday reality" respectively; see LPJC, 77. (J. Heath-Stubbs, "John Clare and the Peasant Tradition" in Penguin New Writing, 32, 1947, 112-24; rpt. The Darkling Plain; London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1950).

⁸ As I observed in chapter one (see p. 19 above) Clare invokes more than sixty girls' names in the asylum poems. (The one hundred or so love songs and ballads written before the asylum period seldom mention specific names, other than Mary's.) The Tibbles have always been cautious about ascribing these names to actual women, and Paul Schwaber goes as far as to say that they "are all synonyms for Mary" (Schwaber; op. cit., note 1 above; p. 224), but Robinson and Summerfield have successfully tracked some of them down (see "John Clare: An Interpretation of Certain Asylum Letters" in Review of English Studies, 13 (n.s.), 1962, 135-46). Elsewhere, however, they comment that "even when he writes, as he often does, of other girls, one can see that it is really Mary who inspires him." (Introduction to CSPP, p. 21.) Clare probably has Mary in mind in "The Secret" when he writes:

And all the charms of face or voice
 Which I in others see
 Are but the recollected choice
 Of what I felt for thee. (JCSP, 223)

It may well be that this confusion was in some ways instrumental in easing Clare's distress during his long years of isolation. The intensity of his yearning for a lost Mary is necessarily diminished by the diversification of his affections and many of the later love songs manage to recreate an idyllic courtship without sinking into despair. Although the girls to whom he swears his love are probably the actual companions of his childhood or youth, they matter less as individuals than as types of female beauty, whereas his recollections of Mary are apparently more vivid and more prone to anguish. The main problem expressed in Clare's Mary poems, in both his pre-asylum and asylum years, is, in Janet Todd's words, "the discrepancy between the memory and the assumed present reality of Mary on the one hand, and the ideal Clare has created from them on the other."⁹ Dr. Todd finds that almost every poem on Mary deals with the opposition of the idealized and the real woman, and that this problem is never satisfactorily solved, being finally evaded altogether in the disappearance of the real. In the poems of the 1820's Clare shows himself to be hurt by Mary's parting from him, but nevertheless he can affirm: "Thou art an angel still" (JCSP, 138). In the early 1830's she comes to him in a series of eschatological dreams as a "woman deity", a "lady divinity", a "guardian genius", clothed in white garments and bathed in ethereal light.¹⁰ At High Beech, as mentioned above,

⁹ Janet Todd, "Mary Joyce in the Poetry of John Clare" in Mary Wollstonecraft Newsletter, 1, July 1972, 12-18.

¹⁰ See Prose (Tibbles, 1951), pp. 231-33, and PJC, I, 399-408.

Clare longs for Mary with an aching heart, and such is his frustration at this time that he wavers between a continuing idealization and a virulent disparagement of womankind simply because, one suspects, the ideal is so utterly unattainable.

Milton sung Eden and the fall of man
 Not woman for the name imples [sic] a wh—e
 And they would make a ruin of his plan
 Falling so often they can fall no lower
 Tell me a worse delusion if you can
 For innocence — and I will sing no more
 Wherever mischief is tis womans brewing
 Created from manself — to be mans ruin (LPJC, 83)

There is some Byronic posturing here, but the sentiments are probably honest enough. In both "Don Juan" and "Child Harold", as Janet Todd points out, there is a "debasement of physical love, which, except transmogrified, can have no part in the ideal."¹¹ At the outset of the latter poem Clare resolves:

The past I will not as a mourner bemoan
 For absence [sic] leaves Mary still dearer to me (LPJC, 36)

but he is not long in bemoaning the fact that

The strongest bitterest thing that life can prove
 Is womans undisguise of hate and love (LPJC, 64)

Although the conflict between the ideal and the real never fades entirely,¹² the Northampton poems on the whole attain

¹¹ Todd, op. cit. (see note 9 above), p. 17.

¹² When Clare left High Beech he avowed: "I care nothing about the women now for they are faithless & deceitfull" (Letters; Tibble, 1951; p. 295; cf. a letter as early as 1821, p. 124: "I'm weary of whining over eyes like Sunbeams lips of rubies & rosey cheeks ..."). At Northampton this disaffection occasionally survives: "too much love turns dirty" (LPJC, 138); "O Love is so decieving [sic] ... " (LPJC, 157); and similar sentiments in LPJC, 246-7; JCSP, 289; and PJCM, 142, 174-5. In one of his epigrams he compares women to mushrooms

a greater equanimity, and the girls who populate them are usually paragons of beauty and virtue.

Without labouring biography or chronology any further, I want to follow the process of divinization as it applies to Woman in Clare's poetry. There is an obvious link between the poet's love for Mary and his reverence for the past, and it is logical to see her as filling the rôle of Eve in the paradisial landscape. She is, in "Child Harold", the "flower of Eden" (LPJC, 60), and throughout his poetry there is this very close association between Ideal Nature and Ideal Woman. The delicate beauty of a summer morning, for instance, is captured by means of seductive personification:

The morning now right earlily in dew
 Bathed her sweet naked limbs of fairest hue,
 While like a veil all careless thrown aback
 On her white shoulders hung her hair so black;
 And when the sun a minute earlier rose
 The lovely morning sought her cloudy clothes,
 But finding none she hasting shrank away;
 For night abashed had startled into day.
 The sun reigned absolute in cloudless sky
 And wooed morn's timid beauty to comply,
 And scarlet as the dress she earlier wore
 Her white face turned that was so fair before;
 While fear in every limb diffused its charms
 As soft she sighed and melted in his arms. (PJC, I, 540-1)

On mornings such as this the bees and doves and foxes are wakened to amorous impulses, "The flowers join lips below, the leaves above, / And every sound that meets the air is love" (PJC, I, 534). The winds are particularly sportive:

— "they seldom get better by keeping" (see E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, "Unpublished Poems by John Clare" in Listener, 29 Mar. 1962, 556). See also footnote 32 below.

The winds with idle dalliance wave the woods
 And toy with Nature in her youthful moods,
 Fanning the feathers on the linnet's breast,
 And happy maid in lightsome garments drest,
 Sweeping her gown in many a graceful shade,
 As if enamoured of the form displayed. (PJC,II,134)

In "The Pleasures of Spring" the woodland flowers are depicted as "timid beautys" in lonely seclusion, "Save when a lovesick breeze with amorous sigh / Lifts their green veils to kiss them, passing bye";¹³ they are wooed again at night when the moth "steals to kiss the sleeping flowers."¹⁴ In another "Spring" poem the merry maidens "spend in sport the time they have to spare, / Pressing the gold locks of the enamoured sun / On pleasant banks, with young love toying there!" (PJC,II,131). Nature, in return, shows herself partial to maidens in a number of the later love songs: the wind is "enamoured" of the poet's sweetheart (JCSP,225), and dances round her as if "i' love wi' the maid" (LPJC,230) —

How fresh it makes the maiden,
 How soft her drapery seems,
 Her cheeks wi' roses laden,
 How round her lovely limbs.
 It lays her ankles bare
 And wins a thousand ways —
 What swelling calves are there
 Which the courting wind betrays. (PJCM,180)

¹³ Printed by W.K. Richmond, Poetry and the People (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947); pp. 230-42; these lines are on p. 232. Cf. "The Happy Bird" (PJC,II,246), in which the bird is wooed by the wind, "an enraptured guest"; and "Flowers" (PJC,II,436), in which the winds are the "suitors" of the flowers.

¹⁴ Richmond, op. cit. (see note 13 above), p. 240.

So close is the association between Nature and Woman that at times Clare is justifiably jealous of their intimacy. The clouds, the dew, the butterfly, the skylark, and the winds all indulge in flirtatious kissing, and "The flowers are ravished by the bees", but to Mary he complains:

And I've not once kissed you! (PJC,II,508-9)

Clare uses a number of other means to harmonize Nature and Woman. One of his favourite devices is the play on words: "I pluck summer blossoms, / And think of rich bosoms" (PJC,II,428) ... "Could I press thy bonny bosom Swelling like a bursting blossom ... " (LPJC,211).¹⁵

Another is the use of natural objects to communicate tidings of a loved one, and for this purpose the songs of birds and the names of flowers are of special use. The hero of "Going to the Fair" is favoured with some avian advice:

'Chewsit,' the pewit screamed in swopping whews,
'Choose it!' said Simon, 'I know whom to choose.'
Thus ne'er a bird could sing but Simon's cares
Shaped it to something of his own affairs.
(PJC,I,508)

Clare shapes a birdcall to his own affairs quite frequently, though the message may vary considerably. "Birds tell me so upon the bough / That I'm thread bare and old" he laments in a ballad to Mary (LPJC,182), but elsewhere he

¹⁵ Cf. "Hid in the bosom of a flower" (LPJC,216) and "The Primrose ... / Shows sulphur bosom in the morn" (LPJC,262). One of Mrs. Barbauld's hymns contains the words: "The buds spread into leaves, and the blossoms swell to fruit; but they know not how they grow, nor who caused them to spring up from the bosom of the earth." (Mrs. Barbauld, Hymns in Prose for Children, vii; London: Murray, 1880; p. 39.) See also note 17 below. On Clare's puns see p.219 below.

recalls "how happy the lark would / Sing songs to sweet Susan to remind her of me" (LPJC,267). In "Country Courtship" the birds whistle approvingly while the poet courts a fair maid — "The Jays they almost seem'd to talk" (LPJC,265) — and on another occasion he is fain to pick up a garter which a girl has dropped, but is apparently counselled otherwise:

The blackbird sung out let it be ... (LPJC,267)¹⁶

The significance of flower-names is reasonably obvious:

"True love lies bleeding" is a token of unrequited love (JCSP,310), the "forget-me-not" of fidelity, and "Speedwell" of good fortune (PJCM,119). A common weed, unheeded by the crowd, is "Honesty" (PJC,II,108-9).

Ay, flowers! The very name of flowers,
That bloom in wood and glen,
Brings spring to me in winter's hours,
And childhood's dreams agen. (PJC,II,433)

¹⁶ In one of Clare's ballads a maiden expresses the view that "Birds to make lovers happy should sing", but the thrush has the effrontery to sing "Heavy wet"; on being scolded he changes his tune to "Cheer up" (PJC,II,95). "Cheer up" is also included in the repertoire of the nightingale in "The Progress of Ryhme [sic]", along with "Chew-chew", "Wew-wew", "chur-chur", "Woo-it woo-it", "Tee-rew tee-rew", "jug jug jug", and other evocative sounds (see SPP,122-3). In "Bird's Lament" (PJC,II,100) there is a correlation between various birds' plumage and the message of their songs, and in "The Firetail's Nest" (PJC,II,246-7) the bird's call of "tweet-tut" indicates its constant anxiety. In a poem on Cowper we are told that "Birds sing his name in every bough, / Nature repeats it in the wind" (JCSP,308). Clare also enjoys mimicking their songs: "I ... mock the fond whistles of glad singing birds" (LPJC,198); cf. "The Mock Bird" (PJCM,55); but sometimes the game is reversed: "The birds our voices seem to mock" (LPJC,222).

Primroses, violets, cowslips, kingcups, and bluebells all represent some aspect of his love —

And every flower that had a name
 Would tell me who was fair;
 But those without, as strangers, came
 And blossomed silent there:
 I stood to hear, but all alone
 They bloomed and kept their thoughts unknown.
 (PJC, II, 435)

One device which Clare particularly favours is the use of botanical imagery to describe the physical attributes of Woman. At its simplest this involves the formulation of fairly routine metaphors: Mary is "the blossom I love" (PJC, I, 257), possibly because she wears the poet's garland (see SPP, 37-8); Patty is "a wilding flower" (JCSP, 188); and idealized ("fond, fair, and weak") Woman is a gorgeous bloom "In virgin perfection" (PJC, I, 255).¹⁷ The ubiquitous "She" is "like the daisy on the hill ... the wood Anemonie ... the goud spink on the thorn" (LPJC, 100), though she is not always so accessible:

I wish she'd cum among the flowers
 And be a flower her sell [i.e. self] (LPJC, 99)

Clare's repetitious images of lily or rose or buttercup¹⁸

¹⁷ All four poems cited make use of a blossom-bosom association. With reference to the last cited poem (PJC, I, 255) E.J. Bush remarks: "One feels that love of nature and love of a woman are identical emotions." (Bush; op. cit., note 1 above; p. 145.)

¹⁸ Buttercups are worth noting for Clare's repetition of a favourite simile (cf. note 30 in chapter 4 above): they close up at night "Like tender maiden muffld [sic] from the cold" (SC, 37; cf. PJC, I, 376). J.W. Tibble, for reasons unclear, reprints the last fourteen lines of "March" from The Shepherd's Calendar (i.e. the lines in SC, 37; in Tibble, PJC, I, 307) as a separate sonnet belonging to the years 1824-32 and published in 1837 (see PJC, II, 149).

are perhaps tiresome, but occasionally he surprises with the incongruous:

I clasped her by the neck so soft, like heap of
burning twitch ... (PJC, 183)

More felicitous are his lines on "Love and the Flowers", in which the flowers themselves whisper love to those who stoop to hear (see PJC, II, 493), or his stanza on the perennial sweethearts of youth:

I loved and wooed them in the field like gems
Of two [sic] much value for the clown who sung
The azure bluebells in their sapphire stems
Among green bushes low their mute bells hung
These seemed love's modest maidens dew bestrung
With blebs o' mornings glittering pearls
I loved them in the vallys where I sung
With their green drapery and crispy curls
I loved them as a crowd of blooming girls (LPJC, 145)

"One is tempted at times to wonder," writes L.J. Masson, "whether Clare uses flower images to declare his love for a woman, or whether love poems addressed to women are merely vehicles for displaying his love for flowers."¹⁹ So habitual is Clare's use of floral imagery that he represents his own relationship with Woman as an organic unity: "I was the leaf and she the flower And both grew on one stem" (LPJC, 224).

More than just being represented by botanical emblems, however, Woman is sometimes shown to be a part of the Edenic landscape in a much more "visionary" fashion. At such times the poet sees her manifested in the very forms of Nature:

The poet is a silent thing,
A man in love, none knoweth where;
He sees her in the boiling spring,
At evening on the blooming brere;
He hears her in the song of birds,

¹⁹ Masson, op. cit. (see note 1 above), pp. 112-13.

He sees her in the evening sky,
 A shepherdess among the herds,
 A milkmaid with the grazing kye. (PJC,II,472)

The poet's love is as omnipresent as Nature's vestiges of Eternity, and once again it is "fancy" that inspires his perception:

I saw her in the meadow lake
 In every flower the maid appear'd
 The lark seem'd singing for her sake
 And every bloom the maid endeared
 In fancys ear she spoke as plain
 And soft and lovely as before
 My eyes looked after her in vain
 And saw the meadow as before
 Yet till the mirk eve lowered the sky
 Her spirit seem'd as lingering nigh (LPJC,273)

As we might expect, she reveals herself especially in flowers. "If I look on a wild flower," Clare confides, "I see her face there" (PJC,II,507). The danger of this vision, of course, is that it depends on a suspension of the poet's disbelief; when reality reasserts itself he is liable to be disillusioned:

In the yellow gorse I see her
 But that's wi' fancy's eye,
 For I'm longing to be wi' her
 While in prison bonds I lie. (PJC,II,498)

The restless mood of this stanza is felt again in "The Lost One":

I seek her in the shady grove,
 And by the silent stream;
 I seek her where my fancies rove,
 In many a happy dream;
 I seek her where I find her not,
 In spring and summer weather:
 My thoughts paint many a happy spot,
 But ne'er we meet together. (PJC,II,502)

The implication of this stanza is that Woman is the only thing wanting to restore Nature's broken harmony. Edward Thomas in his Feminine Influence on the English Poets noted

that Clare's Mary is in so "complete a harmony with Nature" as to be "a part of the spring, a part inexplicably absent,"²⁰ and presumably he had in mind the lines from one of Clare's later ballads:

Say where can my Mary be gone
The spring brightly smiles — and 'tis shame
That she should be absent alone ... (LPJC,181)

In "Child Harold" he similarly complains:

I've sought her in the fields and flowers
I've sought her in the forest groves
In avanues [sic] and shaded bowers
And every scene that Mary loves
E'en round her home I seek her here
But Marys abscent [sic] every where (LPJC,56)²¹

The same sentiments are echoed in songs to many other girls:
Nature "Looks cold ... when Phebe's away" (LPJC,115);
the scene would be beautiful "could I but my Hannah see"
(LPJC,272); and "If thou art absent, Helen, / The spring
is absent too ... " (PJCM,146).

In my introduction I quoted Edmund Blunden's observation that a great part of Clare's verse "is a history of the transference of love in him from woman to Nature",²²

²⁰ Edward Thomas, Feminine Influence on the Poets (London: Secker, 1910), p. 81; Storey p. 312.

²¹ Cf. "Mary" (JCSP,294-5) and "The Sharp Wind Shivers" (PJCM,192-3). In "Where love are you?" (LPJC,220) the hour for courtship is perfect and the poet is attended by bees, crickets, ladybirds, and moonshine, but his lover cannot be found.

²² Edmund Blunden, Nature in English Literature (London: Woolf, 1929), p.55; Storey p.379. L.J. Masson offers the following analysis: "Nature awakened the power of love; woman seemed the greatest beauty in nature, and therefore claimed a part of his love; love of woman and love of nature proved to be different if not contradictory experiences, and the poet suffered disappointment and disillusionment while trying to find an ideal woman; so the poet, frustrated in his attempts to love woman as he loved nature, abandoned love of woman for love of nature." (Masson; op. cit., note 1

but it is evident that these two objects of his affections are virtually inseparable. On a few rare occasions he seems to prefer Nature's company to Woman's, as when he longs for "A place where woman never smiled or wept" (CSPP,222), or retreats to the shady forest, "Not needing a friend" (PJCM,147). There is an asylum stanza which exhorts us to look for love in flowers rather than in "human things", but the poet goes on to blend natural forms with "first love's face":

Dost dream o'er faces once so fair,
 Unwilling to forget?
 Seek nature in the fields, and there
 The first love's face is met:
 The nature-gales are lovers' voices,
 As nature's self can prove;
 The wild field-flowers are lovers' choices,
 And nature's self is love. (JCSP,287)

There are also hints that Woman is preferable to Nature, though most of these belong to the hyperbolic language of love, reminiscent of Thomson's description of the moment when "All Nature fades extinct" and the thought of love

above; p. 130.) I can find little evidence in the poems for an abandonment of the love of woman. I cite in my text the line from "I am" (CSPP,221-2) which seems to show a disenchantment with woman, but the poem was written towards the beginning of Clare's confinement at Northampton (between 1844 and 1846), and there is no good reason for regarding these lines, as Middleton Murry did, as "perhaps the truest words he ever wrote of himself" (see Times Literary Supplement, 13 Jan. 1921, 17-18; rpt. John Clare and Other Studies; London: Peter Nevill, 1950; p. 17; Storey p. 339). One could just as easily claim that distinction for the following lines:

Fate and Fortune long contrary
 Grant but one request to me
 Bless me in the charms of Mary
 Nothing more I ask of thee.

(Printed by Julian Park in "Unpublished Poems by John Clare" in University of Buffalo Studies, June 1937, 67.)

alone "possesses every thought, / Fills every sense, and pants in every vein" (Seasons, I, 1013-15). The face Clare loves is "Three times as sweet, or nearly," as woodbine or clover (PJC, II, 486); Nelly Giles is "ten times ... handsomer" than lilies and cowslips (LPJC, 139); mossy banks are fine, "But better than mossy banks twenty times over" is Sweet Susan (LPJC, 221). Compared with the beauty of such women, roses "have no strength, they have no power, / They stir no heart-hid ecstasies" (PJCM, 115).²³ Nature's delights are "na' sae sweet" as a maid "in sunday claes" (LPJC, 97), and they afford no peace "While love is in its dotage" (LPJC, 114). In short, "There's nothing like such beauty / With a woman ere compares ... " (JCSP, 294).²⁴ For the most part, though, Woman and Nature are shown to be in perfect concord, and the one must surely be possessed of all the attributes of the other. Certainly Nature is as much enamoured of Woman as is Clare himself: birds

²³ There may be an allusion in the poem from which these lines are quoted to Cymbeline II, ii, 11-50. The poem describes a slumbering Imogene.

²⁴ Statements to the effect that his love is "a finer flower then [i.e. than] ever grew" (LPJC, 111), and in particular "sweeter than the wild rose" (LPJC, 216), are quite common — see e.g. LPJC, 118, 206 and 268-9 (cf. PJCM, 117). Girls specifically named as being fairer than flowers include Sally Frisby (LPJC, 117), Mary King (LPJC, 123), Katharine Airlie (LPJC, 131), Mary Green (LPJC, 142), Susan Gale (LPJC, 158), Julia (PJCM, 155), Mary Bayfield (PJCM, 170-1), Jane Wilson (PJCM, 173), and Lucy (PJCM, 199).

rejoice "As tho they sung for marys praise" (CSPP,49), winds "steal the kisses from her mouth / And waft her voice to me" (LPJC,48), and fancy "shapes her form in every dell" (LPJC,44). The vitality and warmth of the poet's love can only be expressed in similes drawn from the fecundity of the seasons:

While the winter swells the fountain
 While the spring awakes the bee
 While the chamois loves the mountain
 Thou'lt be ever dear to me
 Dear as summer to the sun
 As spring is to the bee
 Thy love was soon as won
 And so twill ever be

(LPJC,66)

There is a feeling here that Love and Nature are coessential and coeternal, and the image of the sun, as shown in chapter four, stresses the permanence and divinity of both.²⁵ Clare sums up the relationship between them in a line from "Child Harold": "Nature Invigorates And Love Will Bloom" (LPJC,74).

Nature's invigoration of Love is apparent in the hundreds of courtship poems which Clare wrote in Northampton Asylum. A great many of these poems follow a basic formula which involves a rendezvous, often clandestine, with a named girl, a brief catalogue or blazon of her charms, and a description of the idyllic natural setting. Thus Mary

²⁵ There are many instances of his love's eye being likened to "A living sun of living joy" (PJCM,138) — see p. 154 above. Janet Todd argues that Mary "becomes a type of God who is associated with the glory and light of the sun." (Todd; op. cit., see note 1 above; p. 146.) Mary's absence is likened to winter or an overcast sky. Dr. Todd notes that it is not so much Woman that is eternized by Clare as Love "insubstantialized and disembodied" (see pp. 158-60).

Neal is acclaimed for her "dark and flowing hair" and is courted in the woods (LPJC,159); Bessey has a "lilly bosom half way bare Which blue veins richly dapple" and is met in the sunny fields (LPJC,210); and Dinah is graced by "ringlets adown her cheek glowing" and is wooed among moonlit rushbeds (LPJC,224-5). The variously alluring features of these girls betray the fact that Clare's phantoms of delight are poor mortals after all: "The girl I love," he insists, "is flesh and blood" (LPJC,196), and while this doubtless fortifies sensual pleasure, it inevitably undermines the ideal. Sensual pleasure, nevertheless, demands a voice:

O come to me dear wi' thy own maiden head
Where the wild flowers and rushes shall make thee a bed
We will lie down together in each others arms
Where the white moth flirts by and gives us alarms ...
(LPJC, 227)

In one of his songs Clare achieves a vaguely sexual innuendo by employing an ambiguous phrase:

I took [her] by the waist so [small] All in a pleasant
place
She no denial made at all But smiled upon my face
(LPJC, 205)

The "pleasant place" is developed in the subsequent stanza:

I cuddled her in the green grass And sat among the hay
Till sunshine o'er the hill did pass And daylight
went away
I kissed [her] o'er her bonny face So tender and so true
And left my blessing on the place Among the foggy dew
(ibid.)

In another poem he tells how he courted a lass "In such a fitting place", and in the wheatfield they "lay together

side by side" (LPJC,261).²⁶ Without innuendo, however, that "fitting place" is evoked repeatedly as an Edenic background to romantic love, and a single stanza may represent hundreds of like sentiment:

Let us go in the fields love and see the green tree
 Let's go in the meadows and hear the wild bee
 There's plenty of pleasure for you love and me
 In the mirths and the music of nature
 We can stand in the path love and hear the birds sing
 And see the woodpigeons snap loud on the wing
 While you stand beside me a beautiful thing
 Health and beauty in every feature
(LPJC,168)²⁷

My purpose in focusing on the relationship between Woman and Nature has been to suggest that the former partakes of the divinization of the latter by virtue of close association, and that both ideals are essential to Clare's vision:

Tw'as matchless Eve in paradise
 With beauty from above
 That gave to Man without Earth's vice
 Her love(LPJC,195)

²⁶ W.F. Knight, the copyist of many of Clare's asylum poems, substituted "walk'd" for "lay". For further comment on Clare's amorous realism see p.233 below. E.P. Hood wrote naively when he commented in 1851 that Clare's poems "never burn with passion — they glow with modesty and sensibility." (E.P. Hood, The Literature of Labour; London: Partridge, 1851; pp. 128-64; Storey p. 258.)

²⁷ A large proportion of Clare's love songs take the form of an invitation to wander outdoors — "Come forth, my love, and go with me" (PJCM,211). Invitations to meet him at dusk are also common, and the place of assignation is generally blissfully secluded. Less common, but no less fruitful, are chance meetings. "I did not know her name," he tells us in one poem, "But her person I love dearly ... " (JCSP,329).

Middleton Murry saw Mary as "the genius of [Clare's] childhood, which appears to him as a paradise from which he has been cast out",²⁸ and in the words of Robinson and Summerfield she is "the symbol of innocence, the Eve of his Eden, the First Love which was to be the touchstone for all later experience."²⁹ Many poets have showed this adoration of an individual woman who represents an ideal of love: various critics have instanced Dantë's Beatrice, Plutarch's Laura, Hölderlin's Diotima, de Nerval's Adrienne, and Arnold's Marguerite. Keats and Shelley both devoted themselves to unattainable goddesses, and Coleridge closed his "Pains of Sleep" with lines that struck a responsive chord in Clare:

To be beloved is all I need,
And whom I love, I love indeed. (ll.51-2)³⁰

²⁸ J. Middleton Murry, op. cit. (see note 3 above), p. 74.

²⁹ E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, introduction to CSPP, p. 21. M.G. Minor argues that Clare's conception of Mary as Eve begins as early as 1821-24 (see Minor; op. cit., note 1 above; pp. 84-5). E.J. Bush concurs, but finds that during Clare's middle years she is "more woman than goddess. Clare never again while he was sane treated Mary in the idealized manner that he had in the dream poems. It was only after his madness allowed him to cut all ties to reality that she became again his guardian spirit." (Bush; op. cit., note 1 above; p. 260.)

³⁰ Clare quotes these lines in a song from "Child Harold" (see LPJC, 45), substituting "them" for "whom". Coleridge's idealization of Mary Evans is examined by M.F. O'Hear, "The Constant Dream: Coleridge's Vision of Woman and Love," Dissertation Abstracts, 31 (1970), 4174A (Maryland). On Keats see R.B. Ribman, "John Keats: the Woman and the Vision," D.A., 24 (1963), 2019A (Pittsburgh); on Shelley see C.P. Rose, "Shelley's View of Woman," D.A., 21 (1959), 1186A (Claremont); and on Byron see G.T. Hull, "Women in Byron's Poetry: a Biographical and Critical Study," D.A., 33 (1972), 2894A (Purdue). On attitudes to

A writer in the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine of 1867 was the first to make some of these comparisons, but she adds: "To our mind no psychological phenomenon of this kind was so remarkable and inexplicable as this soul-worship of John Clare."³¹ With the advantage we have of fuller biographical knowledge it may not be so inexplicable, but it is nonetheless remarkable.

Clare's soul-worship is not only implied by association, it is explicitly stated in many of the asylum poems. I have quoted as a motto for this chapter his lines

But, though I worshipped stocks and stones,
'Twas Woman everywhere ... (PJCM, 62)

and the forthright statement of such sentiments is characteristic of him. If Woman is frequently mythologized as Eve, she is also worshipped as an angel — "Angels are good mens hopes and poets dreams" (LPJC, 137). Clare indulges in this kind of apotheosis (see e.g. LPJC, 224), but he likes to have it both ways:

Angel she seem'd and woman too
So beautiful, so fair,
Aërial forms that live in dew,
Sweet spirits of the air.
She was my boyhood's earliest dreams,
And still my sweetest vision seems. (PJCM, 184)

The ethereal spirit of this poem is still recognizable as the flesh-and-blood companion of his youth, and Clare habitually mingles physical attraction with spiritual

women in English poetry up until the Romantic period see J.B. Broadbent, Poetic Love (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964).

³¹ Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, Feb. 1867, 39-43; Storey p. 284.

adoration.³² When Katey "takes up her gown in my sight" to remove the "inquisitive" creepers from her stockings, he does "nought but worship the rest o the day" (LPJC, 227). When Caradora displays her ankles or her neck as "white as ringdove's eggs", he resolves to "pay thee worship night and day" (PJCM, 177). When his love comes tripping by in dishabille, he swears: "I could have knelt on both my knees and kissed her very feet" (JCSP, 329). There may be some difficulty in differentiating between what is hyperbolic and what is genuinely religious in Clare's vocabulary,³³ but there can be little doubt that

³² As we might expect, such mingling is not without its tensions. "Love and Beauty" states the opposition between the ideal and the actual in these terms:
 Love finds them angels ready made,
 So beautiful and blooming;
 But Times comes in, though half afraid,
 And rudely calls them woman. (PJCM, 58)
 Mark Storey ably interprets this poem in Explicator, 28, 1970, item 60.

³³ The degree of significance of the following lines is difficult to determine, but they all tend towards divinization: "I maun luv' aye worship woman in every tale and sang" (LPJC, 126); "Love is ... / The idol of man[s] worship" (LPJC, 145); "She was in heart and loves delight A worship for a man" (LPJC, 216); "To see woman walking / ... Is something so dear / ... I think it divine" (LPJC, 245); "Sweeter than all these visions prove / Is her I worship in first Love" (JCSP, 329); "The bosoms I've leaned on, and worshipped, and won ... (PJC, II, 428); and "[Cowslips] sing the name I've worshipped long" (PJC, II, 434). Of Mary Ann he declares: "I'll worship nature in her eyes" (LPJC, 113); to Ann Sharp he avows: "I'll thy worshiper be" (LPJC, 141); and to Ellen Tree, his "idol angel" and companion of Eden, he promises: "I'll worship [thee] in the evetide hours" (LPJC, 256).

the emotion he felt towards Woman is akin to the reverence in which he held God and Nature. Just as the forms of Nature are hailed as "my aids to worship" (SPP,120), so the forms of women are "God's types o' love / ...

Wafting our thoughts above" —

Creations masterpiece is woman!
 Of lifes dark sphere the soul
 Queen o' every blossom bloomin'
 A light to charm the whole
 Angels of earth tho' made of clay
 Loves type without a wing
 My first and last immortal lay
 Is woman when I sing (LPJC,261-2)

To love "Creations masterpiece" is to love the Creator,
 and not to love her is to be ungrateful:

Gods gift is love and do I wrong the giver
 To place affections wrong from Gods decree
 — No when farewell upon my lips did quiver
 And all seemed lost — I loved her more than ever
 (LPJC,44)

There may be a curious Eastern bias to Clare's logic,³⁴ but

³⁴ It is orthodox doctrine that "To admire what God's sending", as Clare puts it (JCSP,332), is to admire God, but Christian thought has not been happy about applying this to the female form. In "The Song of Solomon", however, there are glowing descriptions of the divine beauty of Woman, and Clare paraphrased part of this book at Northborough (see David Powell, The John Clare Collection in Northampton Public Library; Northampton Public Library, 1964; p. 41). Clare was also familiar with Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy (see JCSP,307; Letters, Tibble, 1951, p. 252), in which it is argued that "a comely person" is indicative of the beauty of God: "If ordinary beauty have such a prerogative and power, and what is amiable and fair, to draw the eyes and ears, hearts and affections of all spectators unto it, to move, win, entice, allure: how shall this divine form ravish our souls, which is the fountain and quintessence of all beauty?" (Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621); London: Tegg, 1854; part 3, section 4, p. 662.) It was in the margin of another of Burton's paragraphs on Woman that Keats wrote the following comment: "There is nothing disgraces me in my own eyes so much as being one of a race of eyes nose and mouth beings in a planet call'd the earth who ... have always mingled goatish winnyish lustful love with the abstract adoration of the deity."

he can justify his devotion to Woman with the strongest possible argument:

Woman through life is mans own diadem
To love God truly may we worship them ...
(LPJC, 144)

The divinization of Woman which Clare climaxes with this couplet is consistent with the relish for eternity which enriches all his writings. Whatever he experienced of human love, it was enough to qualify as an essential ingredient of the envisioned paradise,³⁵ even though the attractions of solitude may have urged him at times to shun emotional commitment for fear of disappointment. The love of a woman, coupled with the freedom of an unspoiled landscape, dominates his aspirations for this life or the next, and only a religious faith can give substance to these hopes:

Religion is the health — the suns bright ray
By which the goal of Love and Freedoms won ...
(LPJC, 132)

Repeatedly Clare links Love with his vision of Eternity, whether it be by proclaiming its divine origin —

In crime and enmity they lie
Who sin and tell us love can die,
Who say to us in slander's breath
That love belongs to sin and death.
From Heaven it came on Angel's wing
To bloom on earth, Eternal spring ... (JCSP, 335)³⁶

(H.B. Forman, ed., The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats; New York: Scribner's, 1938-39; vol. V, p. 309.)

³⁵ A.B. Giamatti finds that all versions of the earthly paradise, from whatever period of literature, involve the two basic ingredients of an ideal landscape, remote in space or time (or both), and ideal love. (See A.B. Giamatti, The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966; p. 84.)

³⁶ Cf. stanza 16 of "Child Harold" (LPJC, 75), in which

or by glorifying the maiden of his fancy —

Her thoughts from heaven surely be
To give to man delight. (JCSP, 337)³⁷

First love has "Immortality's birth" (LPJC, 232), and so he can truly say of the girl he adores: "She's born to grace the realms above / Where we shall both be seen together" (LPJC, 197).

In the course of this thesis I have examined the meaning of the poet's vision, its alliance with the power of fancy, its concern with the vanished Eden, and its translation of earthly beauty into glimpses of the divine. In chapter four I showed that beauty employs "The mind in shaping heavens" (PJC, II, 286) and that Nature may be described as the "truth of heaven" (LPJC, 75), and my present chapter complements these findings by adding the beauty of Woman to God's eternal plan.

Nor is it vain for earth to love
Aught that resembles heaven. (PJC, I, 415)

Love is "Truth on earth as heaven itself can be" (LPJC, 136), and in the face of a bright-eyed maid resides "The

Grigson surmises "Love" and "'Twas" for the missing words (see Selected Poems of John Clare; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950; p. 189).

.... is of heaven still the first akin
...s born in paradise and left its home

³⁷ Cf. "Thy white bosoms heaven near" (LPJC, 246); " ... thy bright black eyes / Bring to my heart's soul / Heaven and paradise" (JCSP, 314); "There's naught so dear in heaven above, / As Mary Bayfield is to me" (PJCM, 171).

beautifull [sic] and true" (LPJC, 119).³⁸ There remains for investigation one further representative of the beautiful and true, and this is the power of Poesy which sustained Clare through all the trials of his life and which he revered as a mystical gift. Discussion of the relationship of Poesy to Woman and to Nature, and of the poetic achievement of Clare, will occupy my final chapter.

³⁸ Cf. "Come dwell ... / With all that's beautiful and good" (LPJC, 128). Clare also describes Sorrow as "thou beautiful in truth" and as preferable to the "charms of youth", but at the same time he depicts her as a raven-haired beauty with a "bosom o' snowdrops" (LPJC, 120-1). Keats's equation of beauty and truth is well known, but the idea is essentially Platonic, being revived in the eighteenth century by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Schelling, and popularized by the poets. Akenside writes in his Pleasures of the Imagination (1757 version):

... for Truth and Good are one;
And beauty dwells in them, and they in her,
With like participation. (I, 434-36)

Similar sentiments are expressed in Cooper's The Power of Harmony (1745) and Harris's Concord (1751).

CHAPTER SIX: THE DIVINIZATION OF POESY

"Surely true worship makes the meanest
theme divine." (JCSP, 132)

I referred in chapter five to a "woman deity" who appeared to Clare in a series of prophetic dreams, the first of which, he tells us, occurred before he had ever written a line. In that first dream the mysterious lady led him by the arm to a bookseller's shop in the city —

she said something to the owner of the place who stood behind a counter when he smiled & at his back on a shelf among a vast crowd of books were three vols lettered with my own name — I see them now I was very astonished & turning to look in her face I was awake in a moment¹

These extraordinary recollections were recorded by Clare more than twenty years after the occasion, by which time he had duly produced his three volumes, but the vividness of the apparition remained unfaded: "I see her still she is my good genius & I believe in her ideally almost as fresh as reality."² It is no longer fashionable to speak of the "inspiration of the muse", but the same phenomenon still exists, as Mario Jacoby has shown, under guise of modern psychological terminology.³ In Clare's poem "The Nightmare" (PJC, I, 404-8), a

¹ J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Prose of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 232.

² *ibid.*

³ Mario Jacoby, "The Muse as a Symbol of Literary Creativity" in J. Strelka, ed., Anagogic Qualities of Literature

De Quinceyized version of one of his dreams, he explicitly identifies his guardian genius as Mary, and many years later he was to hail her as "the muse of every song I write" (LPJC, 48). The process of divinization which elevated Woman in Clare's poetry to angelic status extends quite logically to the poetry itself:

The soul of woman is my shrine
And Mary made my songs divine. (LPJC, 45)⁴

It may also be possible to see the power of making songs divine as an attribute of Nature. The relationship between Poesy and Nature is suggested with some subtlety in one of the asylum poems by means of a play on the words "poesy" and "posy", the latter being a contraction of the former but also designating a nosegay of flowers:

(Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), pp. 36-50. Jacoby notes that: "The muse evokes in human beings what is called enthusiasm. Enthousiasmos in Greek comes from entheos, 'the god within.' Enthusiasm is thus a state where the poet is visited by a god, where a god becomes alive in him." (P. 37). Cf. note 53 below. The muse may be considered as a symbol of what Jung called the "Anima", the feminine side of Man, and the influence of a real or hallucinatory woman may be discerned in the work of Dant , H lderlin, Goethe, Nietzsche, Rilke, Beethoven, Mahler, and many others (see p. 44). See also p. 210 above.

⁴ Cf. the song to Mary entitled "Early Love": "She seemed the muse of that sweet spot" (PJC, II, 502). Elsewhere his lovers inspire "The richest chord of Poesy" (LPJC, 100) ... "By them my harp was strung" (LPJC, 262). In "The Courtship" he argues good-humouredly:
 The Muses — they get all the praise,
 But Woman makes the Poet. (PJCM, 62)
 His complaint is more bitter, however, in "Misfortune":
 Muses my requests disdain
 Are nought but flirting jades. (JCSP, 312)

Childern at every bush a poesy meets
Bluebells and primroses ... (LPJC,157)⁵

The more direct and more usual means is to ascribe poetical talents to Nature's own songsters: the yellow-hammer, for instance, may be described as "Most poet-like" (PJC,II,221), the nightingale as "the Poet of the Woods" (PJCM,60), and the skylark as a "minstrel", "herald", or "bard" (PJC,II,444). Spring is welcomed as "The sweetest poesy of the year" (PJC,II,437), the winds are said to "sing sonnets" (PJC,II,121), and even the bee "hums his ballads" (LPJC,196).⁶ Poesy itself is a power akin to Fancy which depends on natural objects for its inspiration:

Objects of water, earth, or air,
Are pleasing to thy sight;
All live thy sunny smiles to share,
Increasing thy delight;
All Nature in thy presence lives
With new creative claims,
And life to all thy fancy gives
That were but shades and names. (PJC,I,448)

So closely are Poesy and Nature allied that the poet's function

⁵ Keats also resolves "to pluck a posey / Of luxuries bright" from among the hill-top flowers in "I Stood Tip-Toe" (line 27). I have pointed out two of Clare's puns in earlier chapters: "leaves" (of trees or books), see p. 22 above, and "blossom" / "bosom", see p. 199 above. Two more I have let pass without remark: "reign" / "rain", see p. 158 above, and "reflection" (of a mirror or of the mind), see p. 171 above. Others worth noting are "mole" (the animal or the beauty spot) in LPJC,221; "buss" (buzz or kiss) in CSPP,226; and "fast" (secure or quickly) in PJCM,139. See also Grigson's introduction to PJCM, p. 37.

⁶ Cf. "The Bees seemed singing ballads o'er" (CSPP,226); they are also "sweet poets of the summer fields" (PJC,II,18). One is reminded of Plato's comparison of the poet to the bee: "for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; they, like the bees, winging their way from flower to flower. And this is true. For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing..." (Plato, *Ion* in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett; fourth edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953; vol. I, p. 108).

may be best explained by Shelley's image of the lyre: the poet exists simply as Nature's instrument of communication, as her favoured amanuensis.⁷ Clare confides to the autumn wind:

Fain would I win thine harp
To one accordant theme ... (SPP,135)

In a number of poems he seems to lose confidence in his ability to transmit Nature's music: the "strains divine" of the autumn wind make "All songs in vain so mean as mine" (SC,110; cf. PJC,I,370), and Clare cannot refrain from "Wishing its melody belonged to me" (PJC,I,536).⁸ A simple flower may be of more use in courtship than ardent verses:

Tell the wish of thy heart in flowers sweet maid
Words never speak so plain
As a dogrose cropt from the woods green bower
Or a cowslip cropt i' the rain ... (LPJC,248)

The feebleness of Man's words compared with the eloquence of Nature's poetry is lamented by Clare at all stages of his career. In the early "Dawnings of Genius" the poet's "inward powers" are inflamed by natural beauty, awakening sensations "For which his language can no utterance find" (PJC,I,69-70), and in a sonnet of 1810 he is moved to such raptures by a harvest scene, "That language fails the pleasure to express" (PJC,I,116). A sonnet "To Poesy" of 1821 states the inadequacy

⁷ Norman Gale referred to Clare as "Nature's cherished amanuensis" in the introduction to his edition of Poems by John Clare (Rugby: George E. Over, 1901), pp. xlii-iv; Storey p. 300.

⁸ Orthodox poetic theory from Aristotle to Sidney argued that the Art of Man completes what Nature left imperfect, but Bishop Wilkins in his Natural Religion (1675) held that Nature's skill was far superior to Man's. William Derham quoted Wilkins with favour in his Physico-Theology (1713) — see Basil Willey, The Eighteenth Century Background (London: Chatto and Windus, 1950), pp. 40-1. Bishop Berkeley's contention that all things exist as ideas in God's mind, and that Nature is consequently God's language, influenced Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and "The Destiny of Nations."

very clearly:

I would say all, but thou art far above me;
 Words are too weak, expression can't be had;
 I can but say I love, and dearly love thee,
 And that thou cheer'st me when my soul is sad.
(PJC, I, 235)

In the poetry of Clare's maturity the beauty of Nature or of Woman remains "past the power / Of words to paint" (CSPP, 155),⁹ and in "Child Harold" he asks rhetorically: "Can language paint the soul in those blue eyes" (LPJC, 78).

Finally at Northampton the following couplet appears among his jottings:

Language has not the power to speak what love indites:
 The Soul lies buried in the ink that writes. (PJCM, 216)

The problem is one which has worried modern poets in particular, and René Wellek has linked it to "the current cult of silence."¹⁰ Clare is as fine an example as any of the truth of Wellek's observation that: "Since the dawn of history many have felt that language fails to express their deepest emotions and insights, that the mystery of the universe or even of a flower eludes expression in language."¹¹ This failure of words is never so acutely felt as when the poet seeks to

⁹ Cf. Bloomfield: "The vale beyond was fairy ground, / That verse can never paint" ("The Banks of the Wye", III, 106-7).

¹⁰ René Wellek, "The Attack on Literature" in The American Scholar, 42, Winter 1972-3, 27-42.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 29. An anonymous reviewer of Clare's first volume in New Times, 21 Jan. 1820, had occasion to comment: "There is scarcely a man breathing, however education may have assisted him, who has not at times found how inadequate words are to the expression of the workings of an active imagination, how far passion expressed falls short of passion felt." (Storey p. 55).

communicate his love to the girl of his choice. In his "fancy" he can declare his love to "her I've cherished for years" without difficulty, but should he meet her in reality, "I pass her in silence and say not a word" (PJC,II,507). These tongue-tied courtships seem to have occurred quite frequently: on another occasion he writes:

We silent stood together And we passed without a word;
In spring and winter weather Was nothing seen or heard.
I thought to send a letter, But I never wrote a line;
Another time seemed better To ask her to be mine.
But 'another time' was absent: No silence love could prove;
No word was spoke, no line was sent, And so I lost my
love. (JCSP,311) 12

The irony is, of course, that Clare succeeded in writing some excellent lyrics in spite of his avowed speechlessness. "The artist's dissatisfaction with language," notes Wellek, "can only be expressed by language."¹³ However much he despaired of words, Clare strove to harmonize his songs with Nature's divine music, and so profound is his reverence for

12 Cf. "[I] couldn't find out words, / Do you see, / To say to them good-bye" (JCSP, 325); "Peggy said good morning and I said good-bye" (PJC, II, 451); "I loved in silence all the while" (PJC, II, 497). In "First Love" Clare expresses his frustrated ardour quite startlingly:

And then my blood rushed to my face
And took my eyesight quite away.
The trees and bushes round the place
Seemed midnight at noonday.
I could not see a single thing,
Words from my eyes did start;
They spoke as chords do from the string
And blood burnt round my heart. (JCSP, 324)

¹³ Wellek, *op. cit.* (see note 10 above), p. 31.

his task that we should treat with suspicion any remark such as J.W. Tibble's that "Clare was not ... interested in words as words."¹⁴ Very early in his career Clare confided that "when I am in the fit I write as much in one week as would knock ye up a fair size vol,"¹⁵ and there are many other indications that his moments of inspiration were almost feverish:

... the Muse is a fickle Hussey with me she sometimes
 stilts me up to madness & then leaves me as a beggar
 by the wayside with no more life then whats mortal
 & that nearly extinguishd by mellancholy forbodings
 [sic] ...¹⁶

The poems themselves speak frequently of the actual process of writing as a response to a compelling urge, an "itching after ryhme [sic]" (SPP, 121), and in the asylum he refers to poetry as an "opiate" of therapeutic value:

Still sing my muse to drive cares fiends away
 Nor heed what loitering listener hears the lay
(LPJC, 76)

It would be unwise, however, to equate fitfulness with lack of interest in words as words, and one of the things that emerge most consistently from Clare's writings is his awareness of the divergence of his own diction from that of the pastoral tradition. In one of his "Natural History Letters" he

¹⁴ J.W. Tibble, introduction to PJC, I, p. viii. Cf. Dylan Thomas's comment on Clare in Adelphi, 10, 1935, 179-81: "Language to him was rarely more than a vehicle, often somebody else's, to carry along an individual body of feeling and incident." A reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement, 27 Apr. 1956, 252, suggested that J.W. Tibble's observation was made "a little too frowardly" (Storey p. 419).

¹⁵ J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Letters of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 50.

¹⁶ ibid., p. 132.

criticizes the stock-in-trade of the eighteenth-century nature poets:

... the old threadbare epithets of 'sweet singing cuckoo' 'love lorn nightingale' 'fond turtles' 'sparkling brooks' 'green meadows' 'leafy woods' &c &c these make up the creation of pastoral & descriptive poesy & everything else is reckond low & vulgar in fact they are too rustic for the fashionable or prevailing system of rhyme till some bold inovating [sic] genius rises with a real love for nature & then they will be¹ considerd as great beautys which they really are

Like Wordsworth, Clare reacted against stale conventions, and although he agrees with his numerous georgic predecessors that "The rural occupations of the year / Are each a fitting theme for pastoral song" (CSPP,157), he is fervently ambitious of proving himself to be the "bold inovating genius" who will recreate in words "a landscape heard and felt and seen" as never before (CSPP,150). To do this he must set about describing aspects of Nature which "bards disdain to sing" (CSPP,56) — the toil of harvest, the rigours of poverty, the minutiae of plumage and foliage, "And such-like artless things, how mean soe'er they be" (JCSP,27) — and to this end he must enlist the aid of a muse "Who feels no fear to stain her gown" (CSPP,203). In a stanza discarded from his poem "To the Rural Muse" he asks:

Is poesy dwelling in a nice-culled sound,
Or soft smooth words that trifle on the ear
Unmeaning music? Is it to be found
In rhymes run mad, that paint to startled fear
Monsters that are not and that never were?
Is it in declamations frothing high,
Worked like machinery to its mad career?
No, poetry lives in its simplicity,
And speaks from its own heart, to which all hearts reply.
(JCSP,134)

Clare's efforts to write from the heart, to produce a

¹⁷ Prose (Tibbles, 1951; see note 1 above), pp. 172-3.

"plain homespun verse" (JCSP,146), may be traced through the early stages of his career. As a boy, he tells us in his autobiographical sketches, he would pretend that his own verses were those of a respected poet and would read them aloud to his parents.

Their remarks was very useful to me. At some things they would laugh, here I distinguished affectation and conceit from nature. Some verses they would desire me to repeat again, as they said they could not understand them; here I discover'd obscurity from common sense, and always benefited by making it as much like the latter as I could ...¹⁸

Despite their practical advice Clare still occasionally fell into the traps of poetic diction and we wince at his apostrophe to the glow-worm as "Tasteful illumination of the night" (PJC,I,122) or at his personifications of Poverty, Idleness, Shame, and Sloth (see PJC,I,120). Sheep, in an early poem, are styled as "the shepherd's woolly charge" (JCSP,5), and even as late as The Shepherd's Calendar the ewes are unfortunately described as having "paternal cares" (SC,34). These infelicities occur less frequently as his work progresses, but the "moon's airy couch" (CSPP,170) or the "little feathered folk" (PJC,II,15; cf. II,131) still appear from time to time. In a number of poems Clare surprises by juxtaposing a stilted and an original phrase, and Ian Jack has instanced "Autumn" (PJC,I,169) as a mixture of "the particularity of a countryman" and "the tired idiom of the Descriptive Muse."¹⁹ Another fine example is "The Fountain",

¹⁸ Edmund Blunden, ed., Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), p. 63.

¹⁹ Ian Jack, "Poems of John Clare's Sanity" in J.V. Logan et. al., eds., Some British Romantics (Ohio State University Press, 1966), pp. 205-6.

which contains the following two stanzas in succession:

Ye gently dimpling, curling streams,
 Rilling as smooth as summer-dreams,
 Ill pair'd to yours life's current seems,
 When hope, rude cataracts mounting,
 Bursts cheated into vain extremes,
 Far from the peaceful fountain.

I'd just streak'd down, and with a swish
 Whang'd off my hat, soak'd like a fish,
 When 'bove what heart could think or wish —
 For chance there's no accounting —
 A sweet lass came with wooden dish,
 And dipt it in the fountain.

(PJC, I, 88)

The contrast here is so striking as to be probably deliberate, but elsewhere he seems to be wavering uneasily between the conventional and the fresh. "His work can be original and imitative by turns," comments J.W. Purser, "unconsciously borrowed words, images, and phrases being found side by side with novel and even daring ones almost everywhere in his verse."²⁰

Clare's progress from poetic diction to "A language that is ever green" (JCSP, 186) entailed an ever-increasing experimentation with local dialect words, and the resultant disfavour which he incurred from his publisher and from Charles Lamb has

²⁰ Review of English Studies, 9 (n.s.), 1958, 97; Storey p. 425. It should be noted, however, that Clare has the ability to turn juxtaposition to his advantage. Tim Chilcott instances "The Flight of Birds" (JCSP, 215) as achieving tension by "the positioning of the dialect word within the framework of a less verbally evocative diction" as a kind of caesura or kernel. (Chilcott, A Publisher and his Circle; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972; p. 89). "Signs of Winter" (CSPP, 163) is a slightly less successful experiment. Apart from dialect expressions Clare uses a variety of what one might call "unexpected" words, such as "pellitory", "teens", "diurnal", "corderoy", "reiterative", "causeway", "zigzagged", "nectararious", "automatons", "polygot" [sic], and "electric shocks". The asylum poems in particular may surprise:

Sheep ointment seems to daub the dead hued sky,
 And night shuts up the lightsomeness of day,
 All dark and absent like a corpse's eye. (PJCM, 213)

often been documented.²¹ Clare insisted that provincialisms like "hirkles", "suthers", "snufting", "pudgy", "rawky", and "swaly" were poetically valid in spite of the protestations of reviewers that such words "are mere vulgarisms, and may as well be excluded from the poetical lexicon, as they have long since been banished from the dictionary of polite conversation."²² Clare's "vulgarisms" have been prized in our own century as mots justes,²³ though it should be remembered that he is "not primarily a dialect poet"²⁴ and one has little

²¹ See in particular John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840 (Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 125-6, and M.G. Minor, "The Poet in his Joy: a critical study of John Clare's poetical development," Dissertation Abstracts, 31 (1971), 4784A (Ohio State); microfilm pp. 271-93. Taylor's treatment of Clare's provincialisms is attacked by E. Robinson and G. Summerfield in their article "John Taylor's Editing of Clare's The Shepherd's Calendar" in Review of English Studies, 14 (n.s.), 1963, 359-69, but he is defended to some extent by Tim Chilcott, op. cit. (see note 20 above), pp. 86-128. See also notes 30 and 31 below.

²² New Monthly Magazine, Mar. 1820, 326-30; Storey p. 71.

²³ See e.g. p. 294 of M. Channing-Pearce's "John Clare" in Hibbert Journal, Apr. 1941, 291-8. Donald Davie quibbles with the phrase mot juste because Clare does not use "the one exquisitely right word, just the one right one." (New Statesman, 19 June 1964, 964; Storey p. 441.) The shades of meaning of two of Clare's provincialisms, "dithering" and "croodling", are discussed by G. Thomas Tanselle, "Two Words in John Clare's 'Winter'" in Word Study, Oct. 1964, 5-6.

²⁴ Rayner Unwin, The Rural Muse (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. 130. Stephen Wade argues that Clare's judicious use of dialect is "one of the reasons why his readers have increased in number." (S. Wade, "John Clare's Use of Dialect" in Contemporary Review, Aug. 1973, 81-4.)

difficulty in understanding his colourful idiom:

The wren a sunny side the stack
 Wi short tail ever on the strunt
 Cockd gadding up above his back
 Again for dancing gnats will hunt ... (SC,26)

While on the velvet down beneath the swail
 I sit on mossy stulp and broken rail
 Or lean oer crippled gate by hugh [i.e. huge] old tree
 Broken by boys disporting there at swee ... (CSPP,156)

The waterfowl with suthering wing
 Dive down the river, splash and spring
 Up to the very clouds again
 That sprinkle scuds of coming rain ... (PJC,II,299)

There is an embarras de richesse when it comes to illustrating the graphic rustic vocabulary at Clare's command: The Shepherd's Calendar abounds with purple passages of description, the "Village Tales" and longer ballads like "The Cellar Door" (CSPP,89-94) contain some superb characterization and dialogue, "The Parish" is vigorous and earthy throughout, and the hundreds of shorter poems are rich in that evocation of rural life and scenery on which his fame largely rests.

"Summer Images" contains some of his most distinctive lines:

I love at early morn from new mown swath
 To see the startled frog his rout [i.e. route] pursue
 And mark while leaping oer the dripping path
 His bright sides scatter dew
 And early lark that from its bustle flyes —
 To hail his mattin new
 And watch him to the skyes (CSPP,169)

Our interest here is in the verbs and in the adjectives formed from verbs, and this is the case in a great many poems. In "The Summer Shower" (SPP,130-3) the woods are "pattering", the leaves "sopping", the corn "crouching", the showers "humming", "dimpling", and "smoaking";

The plough team wet and dripping plashes home
 And on the horse the ploughboy lolls along ... (SPP,132)

In the well-known poem "[The Badger]" (CSPP,126-8) there are no fewer than one hundred and twenty verbs in sixty-eight lines,

and without exception they are verbs of action. All of the animal poems of 1835-37 share this abundance of verbs, and they are particularly expressive: "grunts", "grins", "snuffs", "bolts", "snaps", "cackles", "struts", "sprunts", "scrats", and many more. Among the sonnets of this period "Mouse's Nest" is characteristic of Clare's realism and spontaneity:

I found a ball of grass among the hay
 And progged it as I passed and went away;
 And when I looked I fancied something stirred,
 And turned agen and hoped to catch the bird —
 When out an old mouse bolted in the wheats
 With all her young ones hanging at her teats;
 She looked so odd and so grotesque to me,
 I ran and wondered what the thing could be,
 And pushed the knapweed bunches where I stood;
 Then the mouse hurried from the craking brood.
 The young ones squeaked, and as I went away
 She found her nest again among the hay.
 The water o'er the pebbles scarce could run
 And broad old cesspools glittered in the sun. (JCSP, 234)

The final couplet here is striking for its diversion of our attention from the subject of the sonnet by means of a shift in focus from the particular to the general as the poet lifts his eyes from the grass to notice other aspects of the landscape in which he takes his walk. No less striking are the openings of some of his poems:

Well! in my many walks I've rarely found
 A place less likely for a bird to form
 Its nest — close by the rut-gulled wagon road,
 And on the almost bare frost-trodden ground,
 With scarce a clump of grass to keep it warm! (PJC, II, 219)

The conversational tone which Clare adopts here was to become a recurrent mode in the asylum poems, but I would not agree with E.J. Bush's charge that his later nature poems are "At best ... self-parodies, at worst, sentimentalized and trite."²⁵

²⁵ E.J. Bush, "The Poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 32 (1971), 3295A (Wisconsin); microfilm p. 331.

Clare has lost none of his freshness in this stanza from

MS.110:

I love the little pond to mark at spring
 When frogs and toads are croaking round its brink
 When blackbirds yellow bills gin first to sing
 And green woodpecker rotten trees to clink
 I love to see the cattle muse and drink
 And water crinkle to the rude march wind
 While two ash dotterels flourish on its brink
 Bearing key bunches children run to find
 And water buttercups they're forced to leave behind
(LPJC,129)

One of his very last poems, dated 1860, shows hardly a sign of abated powers:

The spring is come, and spring flowers coming too,
 The crocus, patty kay, the rich heartsease;
 The polyanthus peeps with blebs of dew,
 And daisy flowers; the buds swell on the trees;
 While oer the odd flowers swim grandfather bees.
 In the old homestead rests the cottage cow;
 The dogs sit on their haunches near the pale,
 The least one to the stranger growls 'bow-wow,'
 Then hurries to the door and cocks his tail,
 To gnaw the unfinished bone; the placid cow
 Looks o'er the gate; the thresher's lumping flail
 Is all the noise the spring encounters now.
(JCSP,342-3)

One could multiply examples of outstanding beauty or effect,²⁶ but every reader of Clare's poetry will have his favourite lines, and every anthologist will find something of Clare's to suit his taste.²⁷ My own ear responds agreeably to the "grunting noise of rambling hogs, / Where pattering acorns oddly drop" (PJC,I,171) and my eye to the "moors and mosses slups and sloughs" (LPJC,202) of Clare's landscape, though I could wish he had not weakened a phrase like "The ancient pulpit trees" by imaging "hollow trees like pulpits"

²⁶ Geoffrey Grigson lists the lines which he finds most "madly surprising" in his Introduction to PJCM, pp. 46-7.

²⁷ Anthologies containing samples of Clare's poetry abound, but the selection made by James Reeves for the Poetry Bookshelf Series (London: Heinemann, 1954) is unsurpassed for its balance of quantity and quality.

in the same poem (CSPP, 194 and 196), or squandered a line like "The sunshine trickles on the floor" (SC56) by embedding it in a poem of more than two hundred rather wearisome couplets. Despite his more than occasional failure to put a final polish on his verses, Clare readily endears himself to his readers by his uncompromising realism, whether he is exposing social injustices, describing the characteristics of flora and fauna, or evaluating the charms of a passing milkmaid. His accounts of rural toil are prefigured to some extent in the poetry of Stephen Duck, who "knew the exhaustion and boredom of Arcady"²⁸ as well as its pleasures, and later in Robert Dodsley, John Dyer, Robert Bloomfield, and James Grahame. With Clare the refutation of a false idealization of country life becomes a more determined purpose, and he both emulates and surpasses those of his predecessors who "take their images from common life where nature exists without affectation."²⁹ It is to his publisher's credit that, for all the "false delicacy" of which he was guilty,³⁰ he could encourage Clare's purpose and commend him "for not affecting a language."³¹ Taylor's taste did not extend,

²⁸ Unwin, op. cit. (see note 24 above), p. 62.

²⁹ Prose (Tibble, 1951), p. 115.

³⁰ See Letters (Tibble, 1951), p. 58, and note 21 above.

³¹ London Magazine, Nov. 1821, 540-8; Storey p. 161. Taylor was obliged to defend Clare against charges of "feeble vulgarity" and "innovating style" such as were made by the Monthly Magazine, Nov. 1821, 321-5; Storey pp. 150-6.

however, to this description of a harvest scene from The Shepherd's Calendar:

In hedge bound close and meadow plains
 Stript groups of busy bustling swains
 From all her hants wi noises rude
 Drives to the wood lands solitude
 That seeks a spot unmarkd wi paths
 Far from the close and meadow swaths
 Wi smutty song and story gay
 They cart the witherd smelling hay
 Boys loading on the waggon stand
 And men below wi sturdy hand
 Heave up the shocks on lathy prong
 While horse boys lead the team along
 And maidens drag the rake behind
 Wi light dress shaping to the wind
 And trembling locks of curly hair
 And snow white bosoms nearly bare
 That charms ones sight amid the hay
 Like lingering blossoms of the may
 From clowns rude jokes they often turn
 And oft their cheeks wi blushes burn
 From talk which to escape a sneer
 They oft affect as not to hear ...

(SC, 71)

One feels that for Clare to have expunged such a passage from his rural chronicle would have been to betray his own integrity, though his integrity suffers from an excess of candour in "Don Juan", a poem which Robert Shaw has condemned for its "hideously clumsy handling of sexual themes."³² Fortunately Clare's preoccupation with whores, buggers, and arses was short-lived and the later asylum poems achieve an amorous frankness without becoming coarse. Thomson and Bloomfield

³² Robert Shaw, "John Clare's 'Paradise Lost' — and Regained" in Northamptonshire Past and Present, III, 1964, 201. Robinson and Summerfield note of "Don Juan" that "it would be wrong to suppose that its coarseness is quite unprecedented in Clare's verse" and refer to some unpublished verse scraps (see introduction to LPJC, p. 6). Clare's problems with critics of "indelicacy" are documented in Storey pp. 60-5 and 190-1.

had both sanctioned half-naked maidens,³³ and Clare, too, has a liking for a "lilly bosom half way bare Which blue veins richly dapple" (LPJC, 210).³⁴ His celebrations of courtship are refreshingly unreserved:

Come my blyth and bonny deary Let me clasp thee
and lie near thee (LPJC, 211)

I kissed her in the green broom i' ecstacy's delight,
Then went home to her cottage and kissed a' the night.
(PJCM, 194)

Where the ivied oak tree leans,
Oer the brambles, there I'll grasp thee,
And teach thee what true courtship means ... (LPJC, 248)

My purpose in appraising Clare's diction has been to show that he responded to the call of Poesy to capture the divinity of unprettified Nature and of undisguised Love with an enthusiasm³⁵ that produced some of the most vigorous poetry in the language. His claims to innovative genius may be substantiated by reference not only to his proficiency with words but also to his verse forms, which, "far from tumbling him into awkwardness and strained diction, seem to aid him in selection, and to prompt the most appropriate choices."³⁶ He experiments with almost every conceivable rhyme-scheme, and even tries his hand at unrhymed verses with outstanding

³³ See e.g. Seasons, II, 355-6 and "The Farmer's Boy", II, 175-6.

³⁴ The blue-veined breast is mentioned again in "The Maid o' the West" (PJCM, 196-7). A breast dotted with moles is equally alluring (see JCSP, 329 and PJCM, 201).

³⁵ See note 3 above on this word.

³⁶ C.A. Russell, "Experience and Relationship: a context for the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1973), 6883A-84A (Pennsylvania); microfilm p. 104.

success.³⁷ His syntax is untutored and consequently, as Edmund Gosse put it, "not above reproach",³⁸ but it has a certain idiosyncratic energy and like Cowper he refuses to "sacrifice the spirit or sense of a passage to the sound of it."³⁹ His command of versification extends not only to the quatrain and the couplet, the pentameter and the tetrameter, the Spenserian stanza and ottava rima, the iambus and trochee, the anapaest and dactyl,⁴⁰ but also to boldly

37 See "Summer Images" (PJC, I, 380), "Autumn" (SPP, 134), "Signs of Winter" (CSPP, 163), "London versus Epping Forest" (PJCM, 61), "Gipsies" (PJC, II, 379), and "Spring" (LPJC, 129).

38 Sunday Times, 5 Oct. 1924, 8; rpt. E. Gosse, Silhouettes (London: Heinemann, 1925), p. 108; Storey p. 375. In a letter to Taylor of February 1822 Clare complained: "I may alter but I cannot mend grammer [sic] in learning is like tyranny in government — confound the bitch I'll never be her slave ... " (Letters; Tibble, 1951; p. 133.) Robinson and Summerfield print part of an unpublished essay by Clare on "castle building grammarians" in their introduction to CSPP, p. 24.

39 Cowper to J. Johnson, Dec. 1784, in J.G. Frazer, ed., Letters of William Cowper (London: Macmillan, 1912), vol. I, p. 334. A line like "Me not the noise of brawling pleasure cheers" (PJC, I, 380; cf. CSPP, 166) is a rare lapse in Clare's judgment.

40 Clare's technical range is a thesis topic in itself and I can only touch on it here. My count is not exhaustive but it yields 8 poems in the Spenserian stanza (some 57 imitations of Spenser were published between 1770 and 1775: see W.L. Phelps, The Beginnings of the English Romantic Movement (1895); rpt. ed., New York: Gordian Press, 1968; appendix 1); 47 poems in the anapaestic metre (first used in the eighteenth century by Rowe in "Colin's Complaint" (1715), popularized by Shenstone, and learnt by Clare most probably from Beattie's "The Hermit" (1777) and Bloomfield's "A Visit to Ranelagh" (1806) and "The Shepherd's Dream" (1822); and 2 in the dactylic metre (see PJCM, 171 and PJC, II, 480-1; this latter poem, I suspect, inspired Robert Graves's "In the Wilderness"). Lascelles Abercrombie praised one of Clare's anapaestic variations (see JCSP, 316) as possessing an "irresistible poignancy of expressiveness" (see Abercrombie, The Theory of Poetry; London: Secker, 1924; p. 171).

experimental patterns:

It is love.
 There's a mildness i' the air;
 The fields are green & fair;
 And sunbeams there
 From above.
 There is singing o' birds;
 There is bleating o' herds;
 Waters waving like curds;
 What is love
 But the landscapes o' spring sunny green o' the grove?
 And the maid walking there Mary Dove? (JCSP, 332)

It is perhaps in his sonnets that Clare shows his greatest inventiveness, though his early efforts are of uneven merit. In 1817 he admitted: "I take little Notice of the Mechanism which all Sonneteers in general are particular to Notice,"⁴¹ and despite Taylor's opinion in 1821 that his protégé had "excelled in his sonnets more than in any other species of composition that he has attempted,"⁴² we could discard the majority of the sonnets in Clare's first two volumes without great loss. Amongst his subsequent work, however, the sonnets "lie so rich and profuse ... that it is very difficult to choose from them, and like a child sorting sea-shells in a bucket, one finds it almost impossible to throw one away."⁴³ In the belief that "Clare's best work is apparent in his shorter poems," R.L. Gillin has devoted a doctoral dissertation to the development of Clare's sonnets, and has calculated that Clare uses twelve different sonnet forms in Poems Descriptive, forty-four in The Village Minstrel, and

⁴¹ Letters (Tibbles, 1951), p. 330.

⁴² Monthly Magazine, Nov. 1821, 321-5; Storey p. 155.

⁴³ Robinson and Summerfield, introduction to CSPP, p. 33.

fifty-four in The Rural Muse.⁴⁴ The prolificness and variety of his output testify to his determination to do justice to his gift.

Clare knew that the poetic impulse was a gift. In one of his most frequently quoted poems he insists: "I found the poems in the fields, / And only wrote them down" (PJCM, 57). Certainly he did most of his composing out-of-doors, sitting in a great hollow oak or strolling over the meadows, and he had but scant regard for the refinements of book-learning — "as to education it aids very little in bringing forth that which is poetry."⁴⁵ In many respects he is the example par excellence of The Poet: "He was very poor: he was uneducated: he was a passionate lover: he described the scenes of external nature with extraordinary fidelity: and for many years of his life he was mad."⁴⁶ Above all, he wrote poetry because he could not help it, as if he were born for that purpose alone. When fame caught up with him unexpectedly he recalled the very beginnings of his career in these lines:

Ah, little did I think in time that's past,
By summer burnt, or numb'd by winter's blast,
Delving the ditch a livelihood to earn,
Or lumping corn out in a dusty barn,
With aching bones returning home at night,
And sitting down with weary hand to write,
Ah, little did I think, as then unknown,
Those artless rhymes I even blush'd to own
Would be one day applauded and approv'd,
By learning notic'd, and by genius lov'd.
God knows, my hopes were many, but my pain
Damp'd all the prospects which I hop'd to gain;
I hardly dar'd to hope. (PJC, I, 228)

⁴⁴ R.L. Gillin, "In That So Gentle Sky: a study of John Clare's sonnets," Dissertation Abstracts, 32 (1972), 6374A-75A (Bowling Green); microfilm pp. 204-9.

⁴⁵ Letters (Tibbels, 1951), p. 254. This is not to say that Clare was poorly versed in English Literature: see appendix II at the end of this thesis.

⁴⁶ Ian Jack, op. cit. (see note 19 above), p. 191.

Once the rural muse had whispered in his ear he was fated to become her devotee — "I cannot, wild enchantress, bid farewell" (PJC, I, 241). She is "engaging" (JCSP, 22), She is "'witching" (PJC, I, 129), She is "Soul enchanting" (SPP, 116). On the face of it he may have acknowledged some such purpose to his writing as "to preserve the folk-culture and the natural beauty of his region,"⁴⁷ but one feels that there is fundamentally a stronger impulse:

True poesy owns a haunted mind,
A thirst-enduring flame,
Burning the soul to leave behind
The memory of a name. (PJC, I, 431)

Having written these lines, Clare quickly assures us that the "burning flame" has not consumed his heart, but despite his frequent expostulations on the vanity of fame,⁴⁸ he can still affirm that the memory of a name is "Everlasting as the river, / Never-ceasing as the wind" (PJC, II, 272). His lightly disguised poetical autobiography, "The Fate of Genius" (PJC, I, 497-500), tells how he is shunned by his neighbours as "the crazy man" and predicts a sequence of disappointment, derision, and death, but even such a melancholy prospect fails to deter him from seeking esteem and renown; as he tells us in "Child Harold":

I read and sought such joys my whole life long
And found the best of poets sung in vain
But still I read and sighed and sued again.
And lost no purpose where I had the will
I almost worshiped when my toils grew vain
Finding no antidote my pains to kill
I sigh a poet and a lover still (LPJC, 49)

⁴⁷ M.G. Minor, op. cit. (see note 21 above), p. 270.

⁴⁸ See e.g. PJC, II, 67, 69, 105, 107, 374, and 375.

That Clare "almost worshiped" in spite of the frustrations that beset his career is indicative of his reverence for the joys, fits, visions, and consolations of Poesy. The lines which I quoted from "Pastoral Poesy" in chapter four⁴⁹ suggest that Poesy is a spirit immanent in the forms of Nature, a universal tongue which proclaims the presence of God and inspires the poet to record his vision of Eternity.⁵⁰ The poet may even be said to be akin to God, since his creation of a poem is, in Coleridge's words, "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."⁵¹ Clare makes no claim to be godlike, but he has no

⁴⁹ See p. 171 above.

⁵⁰ I have accepted L.J. Masson's distinction between poems or poetry and Poesy. "Clare's concern isn't with his poems but with the animating and beautifying principle in nature which he terms 'poesy.'" (L.J. Masson, "The Fearful Vision: the poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 279A (Syracuse); microfilm p. 67.) "Poesy" is often synonymous with the Muse, Nature, or the voice of God; "poetry", as Janet Todd notes, "comprehends the experience of reading, of creating poetry, and of appreciating nature." (Janet Todd, "In Adam's Garden: a study of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 768A (Florida); microfilm p. 53.) The former is often apostrophized as a divine spirit, whereas the latter is the product of communion with this spirit. E.J. Bush comments that: "Clare seems to have sincerely believed, based on his own experiences, that his poetry was written in response to divine prompting beyond himself." (Bush; op. cit., note 25 above; p. 246.)

⁵¹ J. Shawcross, ed., Coleridge's Biographia Literaria (Oxford University Press, 1907), vol. I, ch. 13, p. 202. George Puttenham opened his Arte of English Poesie (1589) with the words: "A Poet is as much to say as a maker.... Such as (by way of resemblance and reverently) we may say of God: who without any travell to his divine imagination, made all the world of nought ... " (G.D. Willcock and A. Walker, eds., The Arte of English Poesie; Cambridge University Press, 1936, rpt. 1970; p. 3.) Addison claims even a little more: "[Poetry] has something in it like Creation; It bestows a kind of Existence, and draws up to the Reader's View, several Objects which are not to be found in Being. It makes Additions to Nature,

false modesty about the honour of his calling:

Poets and Poesy are aspirations
Of mindssuperior to the common lot ... (LPJC, 125)

The superior mind, as I showed in chapter two, is endowed with the gift of fancy which enables poets and prophets to see evidences of the divine in what the common herd dismisses as trifles. Clare looks on Nature's trifles with a willingness to be delighted and instructed, and Poesy does the rest:

I cant contain myself in summers prime
Unless I turn my wanderings into ryhme [sic]
Mere scraps of what I think or feel or see
While sauntering narrow lanes — they are to me
A heritage of happiness and yields
Peace and calm joy from the refreshing fields (52)

Shelley's statement that "Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man"⁵³ would seem to be a singularly appropriate comment on the function of Clare's compulsive rhyming. We cannot read Clare's work without being made aware that to its composition has been applied all the longing and devotion of a man who has been visited by a power beyond

and gives a greater variety to God's Works." (Spectator, no. 421, 3 July 1712, in D.F. Bond, ed., The Spectator; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965; vol. III, p. 579.) Janet Todd finds that Clare accepts the Neoplatonic doctrine of God as a sun or fountain of inspiration and to some extent the Christian belief in Nature as the Book of God, but he does not hold with the Romantic conception which subsumes God in the person of the poet. "For Clare ... the poet in his perception and creation certainly shares, if he does not usurp, God's creative function." (Todd; op. cit., note 50 above; p. 172.)

⁵² E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, "Unpublished Poems by John Clare" in Listener, 29 Mar. 1962, 557.

⁵³ P.B. Shelley, A Defence of Poetry (1821) in D.L. Clark, ed., Shelley's Prose (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 295.

decay:

O Poesys power thou overpowering sweet
 That renders hearts that love thee all unmeet
 For this rude world its trouble and its care
 Loading the heart with joys it cannot bear
 That warms and chills and burns and bursts at last
 Oer broken hopes and troubles never past
 I pay thee worship at a rustic shrine ... (SPP,79)

The "troubles" may not pass, but at least they do not
 triumph: Poesy's mind-restoring powers can lift the poet
 above his cares and mend his "broken hopes":

Muse of the cottage hearth, oft did I tell
 My hopes to thee, nor feared to plead in vain;
 But felt around my heart thy witching spell,
 That bade me as thy worshipper remain:
 I did so, and still worship. Oh! again
 Smile on my offerings, and so keep them green;
 Bedeck my fancies like the clouds of even,
 Mingling all hues which thou from heaven dost glean.
 To me a portion of thy power be given,
 If theme so mean as mine may merit aught of heaven.
 (JCSP,130)

It is perhaps fitting to conclude with this plea to Poesy for
 admission to heaven, since the vision of paradise informs all
 Clare's writings. It is a paradise which suffers no dimin-
 ution of childhood's freshness, no desecration of bountiful
 Nature, no decay of cherished friendships; it is a vision we
 can all share.

CONCLUSION

"And hope love joy are poesy" (SPP, 125)

Clare's progress on the road to fame has not been smooth. The burst of acclaim which encouraged his early career quickly dwindled to an occasional sympathetic murmur, and for nearly a century it seemed he had fallen by the way. During the last fifty years he has steadily regained lost ground, and his reputation may now be said to have reached the critical crossroads. The signposts are conventionally marked "major", "minor", "minor-major", and "major-minor", but the criteria for relative status are far from being settled.¹ It is unlikely that Clare will catch up with Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats, but must he be content with the title of "the best descriptive poet England has produced"?²

I have endeavoured to show in this thesis that Clare shares not only the eighteenth century's enthusiasm for descriptive

¹ Several dissertations on Clare have cited the criteria established by W.H. Auden in his introduction to Nineteenth-Century Minor Poets (London: Faber, 1967), pp. 17-18. The consensus of opinion is that Clare is "great" but not "major". Clare saw himself, perhaps disingenuously, not as an aspirant to Mount Parnassus but as "mingling with the lesser ones on earth" (JCSP, 133) and as the author of "simple verse and unambitious songs, / That in some mossy cottage haply may / Be read and win the praise of humble tongues / In the green shadows of some after-day" (PJC, II, 128).

² M.G. Minor, "The Poet in his Joy: a critical study of John Clare's poetical development," Dissertation Abstracts, 31 (1971), 4784A (Ohio State); microfilm p. 420. Robinson and Summerfield regard The Shepherd's Calendar as "the truest poem of English country life ever written" (introduction to SC, p. xiv).

poetry, for natural history, and for "primitive" rusticity, but also the Romantic passion for imagination and irregularity ("fancy" and "taste") rather than reason and order, and for intimacy with a cherished place rather than mastery of a boundless prospect. To a greater or lesser extent he endorses all the preoccupations of his predecessors — humanitarianism, patriotism, solitude, melancholy, the picturesque, the paysage moralisé — but he adds to these concerns the relish of his contemporaries for childhood, for woman, and for the inspiring muse. To all his themes, I have argued, he brings the earnestness of a mind habituated to seeking intimations of immortality. With Cowper he is willing "To trace, in nature's most minute design, / The signature and stamp of pow'r divine" ("Retirement", 53-4);³ with Blake he is able to "see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower" ("Auguries of Innocence", 1-2); and with Wordsworth he can revere a glimpse of beauty as "one brief moment caught from fleeting time / The appropriate calm of blest eternity" ("Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture", 13-14). It is this spiritual dimension to Clare's mind, I believe, that makes his poetry more rewarding than even the

³ Patricia M. Spacks in The Poetry of Vision (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967) emphasises the relationship between the "visual" and the "visionary" in the poetry of Thomson, Collins, Gray, Smart, and Cowper. "These two notions of vision, as a power for perceiving reality or for expanding it, are both of vital importance to eighteenth-century poetry" (p. 2). They are also of vital importance to Romantic poetry. On views of Clare as a Romantic poet see my Introduction, pp. xiii-xiv above.

best descriptive poetry can hope to be.⁴ In all his work, regardless of whether he was sane or mad,⁵ he is constantly exploring the interrelationship between Nature, Love, Poesy, and God. In "Decay" (CSPP, 204-7), written shortly after his move to Northborough, Clare shows that he conceives of these four Ideals as being so entirely interdependent that the loss of Nature's familiar scenes entails the withering of Love, the waning of Poesy, and banishment from God's Eden.⁶

⁴ This is not to say that Clare is not thoroughly rewarding as a descriptive poet. J.E. Congleton concluded his survey of Theories of Pastoral Poetry in England, 1684-1798 (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1952) with the remark that: "Poetry, [unlike music and painting,] perhaps because of the intellectual intensity of verbal communication, does not seem to be a satisfactory medium for the ideas and feelings evoked by rural life ... " (p. 315). It is a pity that he did not go on to read Clare.

⁵ Janet Todd writes: "Clare's work cannot be divided into two halves ... the asylum poems result from the same quest, and are based on the same concerns, as the poems of his free maturity." (Todd, "In Adam's Garden: a study of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 768A (Florida); microfilm p. 11.) E.J. Bush considers that a preference for Clare's early or late work is "a matter of taste rather than of critical judgment." (Bush, "The Poetry of John Clare," D.A., 32 (1971), 3295A (Wisconsin); microfilm p. 78.) See also my Introduction, pp. xv-xvii above.

⁶ James Reeves in his introduction to Selected Poems of John Clare (London: Heinemann, 1954) rightly recognized poetry, nature, and love as "the triple constellation by which the tempestuous course of Clare's life was directed" (p. xx). E.J. Bush observes that by 1824 "all of Clare's deepest concerns and loves, 'poesy', nature and Mary, are becoming so closely analagous in his poetry as to be inseparable, one always calling forth or connoting the others." (Bush; op. cit., see note 5 above; p. 225).

The fact that he could not realize his vision of harmony does not invalidate his quest.

Modern literature, as J.W. Beach has observed, "is in desperate straits for something to take the place of religion or nature as a means of relieving man's intolerable burden of loneliness."⁷ Under threat of The Bomb the old assurances of the benevolence of the universe and of the indomitable spirit of hope have lost much of their persuasion. Arnold's hopes for poetry as a substitute for religion have not been fulfilled. Women are rebelling against idolization. The case for Nature is now argued apologetically:

The most I would claim for ... the Religion of Nature in this country today, is that it provides certain valuable states of mind which are not only not hostile to religious insight, but are positively akin to it. In this hard, restless, thoughtless world we can ill afford to neglect any such aids to reflexion,⁸ any such restoratives to the life of the spirit.

To Clare we can be grateful not only for his faithful descriptions of rural life but also for his courage in tackling the "eternal questions" which occupied the minds of his fellow Romantics and which, though our attitudes have changed, perplex us still: What is the relation of God to external Nature? What is the source of human love? What is the function of human art, and of poetry in particular? What are our grounds for hope of everlasting life?⁹ These

⁷ J.W. Beach, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry (New York: Macmillan, 1936; rpt. N.Y.: Pageant Book Co., 1956), p. 9.

⁸ Basil Willey, The Religion of Nature (Essex Hall Lecture, 1957; London: Lindsey Press, 1957), pp. 27-8.

⁹ See James Benziger, Images of Eternity: Studies in the Poetry of Religious Vision from Wordsworth to T.S. Eliot (revised edn., Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp. 3-19.

questions will not go away, though they tease us out of thought. In the words of The Preacher: "[God] has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."¹⁰

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes, III: 11 (Revised Standard Version).

APPENDIX I: PRINCIPAL DATES IN CLARE'S LIFE

My approach in this thesis has not been chronological, but from time to time I have made reference to events and periods in Clare's life, of which the following summary may be of use. I have not included dates of publication of the poems of his contemporaries: for these see CSPP, 40-2 and Annals of English Literature, 1475-1950 (revised edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

- 1793 Born at Helpstone, 13 July. His twin sister died in infancy.
- 1793-99 Reared in a cottage divided into four tenements.
- 1800-05 Intermittently attended school at Glinton. Befriended Mary Joyce at school in 1805.
- 1805-09 Worked as an agricultural labourer and attended night-school.
- 1809 Act of Enclosure for Helpstone. Clare began writing poetry, inspired by Thomson's Seasons and folk-literature.
- 1809-10 Renewed friendship with Mary.
- 1810-13 Worked variously as a gardener at Burghley House, a militia recruit, a gang-labourer, a harvester; poetry remained "a troublesomly pleasant companion."
- 1814-18 Laboured at Helpstone, Bridge Casterton, and Pickworth; fell in for a time with gipsies and poachers; courted Elizabeth Newbon and later Patty Turner. Issued a proposal for publishing by subscription in 1817, which attracted the attention of Edward Drury, cousin of John Taylor.
- 1819 Met Taylor, who agreed to publish his poems.
- 1820 Publication of Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery in January; received by the public with acclaim. Married Patty in March.
- 1821 Poems Descriptive ran to its fourth edition. Published The Village Minstrel and other Poems, 2 vols. Taylor acquired the London Magazine (until 1824). Clare last saw Mary in August.

- 1822-24 Met prominent literary figures in London during several visits (after an initial visit in 1820). Suffered from increasing anxiety and illness. Wrote "The Parish".
- 1825 Taylor and Hessey dissolved their partnership.
- 1825-26 Read and wrote prolifically, but suffered from poverty and strained relations with Taylor. Wrote imitations of older poets.
- 1827 Publication of The Shepherd's Calendar, with Village Stories and Other Poems (written in 1824); by 1829 only 400 copies were sold.
- 1828-31 Suffered from depression and visited London in 1828 for relief. Wrote "The Pleasures of Spring". Worked in the fields to feed his large family.
- 1831 Moved to Northborough, to a cottage provided by Earl Fitzwilliam. Declined in health and spirits, but continued to write some of his best poetry — "I wrote because it pleased me in sorrow, and when happy it makes me happier" (Life, p. 301).
- 1833-34 Planned to publish The Midsummer Cushion and met with frustrating delays.
- 1835 Published The Rural Muse (changed title), which was sympathetically received and sold reasonably well.
- 1836 Suffered lapses of memory and delusions.
- 1837 Removed to High Beech Asylum, Epping Forest.
- 1838-41 Treated by Dr. Allen at High Beech; improved physically but not mentally.
- 1841 Wrote "Don Juan" and "Child Harold". Escaped from High Beech (July) and was removed to Northampton Asylum (December).
- 1842-64 Spent last 23 years in Northampton Asylum — the poems themselves are the best indications of his mental states. W.F. Knight was appointed House Steward in 1845 and left five years later.
- 1864 Died at Northampton, May 20, aged 70.¹ Taylor died July 5.² Frederick Martin's Life of John Clare came out in 1865, and J.L. Cherry's Life and Remains of John Clare in 1873.

¹ Anne Tibble mistakenly writes that Clare lived for 74 years (see Introduction to Birds Nest: Poems by John Clare; Ashington: Mid Northumberland Arts Group, 1973; p.8).

² J.W. and Anne Tibble mistakenly record that Taylor died in 1863 (see Letters of John Clare; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951; p. 257).

APPENDIX II: CLARE'S DEBT TO OTHER POETS AND WRITERS

It was a naive correspondent who wrote to the Morning Post on 15 May 1820 that Clare "owes no debt to any dead or living author ... " (Storey p. 83). Throughout his career Clare never hesitated to borrow themes and styles where he saw fit, but his handling of familiar subjects is always distinctive and personal. In 1821 he wrote to Taylor: "When I set about a thing I care not who has done it before me." (J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Letters of John Clare; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951; p. 118.) In the course of this thesis I have shown that Clare has much in common with the georgic and loco-descriptive poets of the eighteenth century, and also with his fellow Romantics, and for convenience this appendix provides an alphabetical index to page-references in my text to writers who may have influenced Clare or with whom he has something in common. I have added some names not previously mentioned, and have supplied further information where appropriate. My list is necessarily brief and selective, and I have excluded many passing references in Clare's writings or in critical discussions to Campbell, Cowley, Dryden, Dyer, Falconer, Grahame, Hurdis, Jago, Logan, Moore, Parnell, Ramsay, Scott, the Wartons, Wesley, and Young, and to the novelists Fielding and Smollett. (Among the poets after Clare with whom he is most often compared are Barnes, Hardy, Hopkins, Housman, and Frost.)

I have not, at this point, been able to read two works which are sure to supplement my index: Joanna E. Rapf, "'The Constellation of the Plough': The Peasant Poets, John Clare and his 'Circle': A Study of their Relationship to Some of the Major Romantic Writers," Dissertation Abstracts, 34 (1974), 6603A (Brown); and Mark Storey, The Poetry of John Clare: A Critical Introduction (London: Macmillan, 1974).

The context of this appendix is chapter 6, footnote 45. For Clare's own comments on his reading see primarily CSPP, 56-7 and 140-1; J.W. and Anne Tibble, eds., The Prose of John Clare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), pp. 50-1, 78-9, 103-42, and 222-4; and Edmund Blunden, ed., Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), pp. 66-7. For the contents of his own library see footnote 15 on p. 130 above. On the biographical background to his acquaintance with various poets see J.W. and Anne Tibble, John Clare, A Life (London: Michael Joseph, 1972). The abbreviations Letters, Prose, Sketches and Life are used below.

ADDISON pp. 85, 130, 238. (These page numbers refer to this thesis.)

AKENSIDE pp. 106, 165, 216.

Ancients

Clare mentions Virgil, Hesiod, and Homer in his poetry (see LPJC, 98), and also Aesop (JCSP, 341), but he knew their work only slightly and in translation (see Letters pp. 211, 215, 249). It is possible that he knew Theocritus.

Ballads

Clare's father had a repertoire of over a hundred ballads (see Sketches p. 46) and Clare's first dabblings in rhyme were imitations of his father's songs (see Prose p. 30). Besides writing many of his own, Clare collected ballads from local villagers and always delighted in the "essence & simplicity" of this genre (Prose p. 120). See Margaret Grainger, John Clare Collector of Ballads (Peterborough Museum Society, 1964).

BEATTIE pp. 43, 54, 234.

The similarities between Beattie's "Minstrel" and Clare's "Village Minstrel" have often been pointed out, but Clare denied any plagiarism (see Storey p. 125).

Bible pp. 131, 163, 169-70.

"I studied the Bible often & found it long before my illness The one book that makes the carnallitys of life palatable & the way to eternity pleasant ... I also find in it the beautiful in poetry in perfection." (Letters p. 249.)

"... the best poems on religion are those found in the Scriptures which are inimitable & therefor all imitations cannot but be inferior." (Prose p. 110.)

"... the more I read the Scriptures the more I feel astonishment at the sublime images I continually meet with in its poetical & prophetic books nay everywhere [sic] about it all." (Prose p. 121.)

Clare wrote a number of paraphrases, most of which are unpublished.

BLAIR

"Blair's Grave [is] a beautiful poem & one of the best things after the manner of Shakespear ... " (Prose p. 119.)

BLAKE pp. 56, 80, 93, 114, 126-7, 133, 148, 175, 241, 242.

Many critics have compared Clare's asylum lyrics with Blake's songs — see e.g. Harold Bloom, The Visionary Company (London: Faber, 1962; rev. and rpt. New York: Cornell University Press, 1971) and footnote 44 in chapter 5 (p. 207) of Janet Todd's "In Adam's Garden: a study of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 768A (Florida).

BLOOMFIELD pp. 21, 46, 54, 56, 70, 77, 115, 124, 156, 166, 221.

"I admire his Genius and readily (nay gladly) acknowledge his superiority as a Poet in my opinion he is the most original poet of the age and the greatest pastoral poet England ever gave birth to ... " (Letters p. 158.)

Clare was at one stage intending to write Bloomfield's Life — see Prose p. 114. For reference to Bloomfield in Clare's poetry see PJC, I, 33, 120, 526-7; JCSP, 136; LPJC, 186.

Arthur Symons sums up what many critics have felt: "The difference between Clare and Bloomfield is the difference between what is poetry and what is not ... The difference between Burns and Clare is the difference between two kinds and qualities of poetry." (Introduction to Poems by John Clare; London: Frowde, 1908; p. 15; Storey p. 303.)

BOWLES pp. 31, 34, 137.

BUNYAN p. 186.

Pilgrim's Progress "pleased me mightily " (Sketches p. 65.)

BURNS pp. 22, 46, 72, 77, 127, 131.

"... its my Opinion that he's an Exelent Poet & far Exceeds Ramsay ... I was charm'd with the Manner of Expressing his homespun thoughts & have attempted accordingly ..." (Letters p. 26.)

"I would sooner be the author of Tam O Shanter than of the Iliad & Odyssey of Homer." (Letters p. 215.)

Among Clare's poems most reminiscent of Burns are "Address to a Lark" (PJC, I, 25), "To an April Daisy" (PJC, I, 81), "Familiar Epistle, to a Friend" (PJC, I, 89), "Fare-Thee-Well" (JCSP, 196), "A Fine Old Ballad" (JCSP, 204), "O wert thou in the storm" (LPJC, 165), "To a Lark singing in Winter" (LPJC, 172), and some 19 songs in the Scots dialect in MS. 110 (LPJC, 97-152).

On Clare's asylum delusions of himself as Burns see Introduction to LPJC, p. 28.
(See also Bloomfield above.)

BURTON p. 213.

BYRON pp. 111, 113, 114, 127, 149, 174, 177, 179, 196, 210.

Clare actually preferred Wordsworth's poetry (see Prose pp. 142 and 210), though he wrote later that Byron "shines as the jewel in the crown of modern literature" (Prose p. 224).

Clare witnessed and gave an account of Byron's funeral — see Prose pp. 99-100.

On Byron's influence on Clare's "Don Juan" and "Child Harold" (the tone is similar to Byron's and some stanzas are directly derivative) see Introduction to LPJC, pp. 4-5 and 24. Clare's earlier "Dream" (PJC, I, 399-403) also resembles Byron's "Darkness".

For reference to Byron in Clare's poetry see JCSP, 192; LPJC, 91-2 and 136-7.

CHATTERTON

"... what a wonderful boy was this unfortunate Chatterton." (Prose p. 105.)

"Coleridge's monody on Chatterton is beautiful ... " (Prose p. 115.)

Chatterton's "The Resignation" was one of the earliest poems Clare read, being printed on a handkerchief bought at a fair (see Prose p. 31).

CHAUCER pp. xxii, 165.

Clare lists Chaucer among his favourite poets (see CSPP, 57).

Clare's "Nightmare" (PJC, I, 404-8) bears some resemblance to Chaucer's "Hous of Fame".

COBBETT p. 73.

"I look upon Cobbett as one of the most powerful prose writers of the day ... " (Prose p. 221.)

COLERIDGE pp. 31, 57-8, 80, 127, 137, 146, 148, 150-1, 158, 171-2, 210, 220, 238.

Clare's fragment on his meeting with Coleridge is in Prose p. 91.

In addition to the echoes from Coleridge noted in the pages above there is a variant of the final couplet of "The Pains of Sleep" in Clare's "The Progress of Ryhme [sic]" (SPP, 124), and the line "As one who long in populous city pent / ... I wander" in "A Rhapsody" (PJCM, 214).

COLLINS pp. 86, 106, 242.

"Read some of the Odes of Collins think them superior to Grays there is little pomp about them & much luscious sweetness I cannot describe the pleasure I feel in reading them ... " (Prose, p. 108.)

Collins's "Ode to Evening" is the model for Clare's "Autumn" (SPP, 134-7). The beetle "Against the Pilgrim born in heedless Hum" often finds its way into Clare's poetry:

Now buzzing, with unwelcome din,
The heedless beetle bangs
Against the cow-boy's dinner-tin,
That o'er his shoulder hangs. (PJC, I, 16)

From the hedge the beetles boom
Heedless buz [sic] and drowsy hum
Haunting every bushy place
Flopping in the labourers face (CSPP, 58)

But the sweetest of all seeming music to me
Were the songs of the clumsy brown-beetle and
bee;
The one was seen hast'ning away to his hive,
The other was just from his sleeping alive —
'Gainst our hats he kept knocking as if he'd
no eyes,
And when batter'd down he was puzzled to rise.
(PJC, I, 75)

And hugh [i.e. huge] black beetles revelling
 alone
 In the dull evening with their heavy drone
 Buzzing from barn door straw and hovel sides
 Where fodderd cattle from the night abides ...
 (SC, 115)

Cf. also LPJC, 189, and the bat and owl in "Summer Images" (CSPP, 171).

COWPER pp. 7, 17, 22-3, 86, 95, 165-6, 234, 242.

Josiah Conder wrote in a review of Clare's Shepherd's Calendar in Eclectic Review, June 1827, 509-21, that: "Cowper was the first poet who taught his readers how to look at the country, and to love it for its own sake, and to turn to nature as a living fountain of consolation." (Storey p. 204.) Elaine Feinstein rightly admires Clare's greater realism and verbal energy — see Introduction to John Clare: Selected Poems (University of London, Tutorial Press, 1968), p. 16. Clare's "My Mary" (PJC, I, 94-7), which so offended Lord Radstock, is modelled on Cowper's "To Mary". For reference to Cowper in Clare's poetry see JCSP, 136, 308; LPJC, 97, 116, 127 (Olney is only ten miles from Northampton).

CRABBE pp. 73, 127.

"'Tales' I lik'd here & there a touch but there is a d—d many affectations among them which seems to be the favourite play of the parson poet... whats he know of the distresses of the poor musing over a snug coal fire in his parsonage box." (Letters p. 75.) Despite his distate for Crabbe Clare owes much to him in "The Parish" and his "Village Tales". (See also Southey below.)

CUNNINGHAM

Clare's portrait of Allan Cunningham is in Prose p. 91. On his debt to John Cunningham see Life pp. 109-10.

DANTË pp. 157, 210, 218.

H.F. Cary, the translator of Dantë, was Clare's close friend — see especially Prose pp. 89-90. Dantë was one of Clare's favourites of the asylum period and Clare refers to him in "The Winter's Come" (JCSP, 307).

DARLEY pp. xxi, 118.

"[I] am very anxious to see anything which Darley writes as there is always something [sic] to interest me." (Letters p. 220). Clare began corresponding with Darley in 1827 though they fell out briefly when Clare suspected him of becoming "a proud high and stiff Professor of English Literature." (Letters pp. 207-8.)

DARWIN pp. 39, 167.

DEFOE

"The Romance of 'Robinson Crusoe' was the first book of any merit I got hold of after I could read ... " (Sketches p. 64; cf. Prose, p. 14.)

DE QUINCEY pp. 31-2, 218.

See Clare's portrait in Prose p. 91.

Clare acknowledged that his "Dream" and "Nightmare" (PJC, I, 399-408) owed part of their merit to the English Opium-Eater.

DUCK pp. vi, 77, 231.

Clare may have encountered Duck in Southey's Uneducated Poets.

Elizabethans pp. xiv, 63, 85.

In 1827 Clare wrote to Darley: "I intend for my own part to strike out on a new road if I can & my greatest ambition is to write something in the spirit of the old Poets not those of Dr. Johnson but those half unknowns who as yet have no settled residence in the Land of Fame ... " (Letters pp. 202-3.) He knew the Elizabethan poets through various anthologies and recorded his relish for them in two sonnets on "Old Poesy" (PJC, I, 527-8). From 1825 Clare began to publish in the periodicals a number of forgeries of Elizabethan verses, attributing them variously to Wotton, Davenant, Harington, Marvell, and Davies — see PJC, II, 181-212; Prose pp. 155-6; Letters pp. 166, 175, 183, 191, 224; Life pp. 231-5, 240, 262. His imitations were remarkably successful.

Other Elizabethans include: BACON: "... what beautiful Essays these are I take them up like Shakespear & read them over & still find plenty to entertain me & new thoughts that strike me as if for the first time." (Prose p. 118.)

SHAKESPEARE: Clare's references to Shakespeare are many and approving but always brief. See above p. 206. His attendance at a performance of The Merchant of Venice ended disastrously when he rose and cursed Shylock vehemently (see Life p. 275). Like Charlotte Smith Clare makes good use of the Shakespearean sonnet — for examples see PJC, I, 520, 533-4, 539-40; PJC, II, 134, 144, 145; JCSP, 217; CSPP, 224-5; SPP, 145; PJCM, 60.

SPENSER: Clare enjoyed Spenser's works, "but I wade about them untill Im [sic] weary & my mind cannot rest to feel their best spirit & manner ... " (Letters p. 195.) On the Spenserian stanza see above p. 234.

SURREY: "Surrey's Sonnets are tender & very poetical there is a breathing of Shakespearean healthfulness about them that is evergreen ... " (Letters p. 256.)

SYLVESTER: See above p. 135.

TUSSER: "... he seems to have felt a taste for enclosures ... I am an advocate for open fields." (Prose p. 122.)

Fairy tales

See CSP, 140-1; SC, 18; PJC, I, 397.

GOLDSMITH p. 68.

Clare's earliest long poem, "Helpstone" (JCSP, 3-7) is modelled on "The Deserted Village". The Vicar of Wakefield was among Clare's favourite novels (see Prose p. 79.)

GRAY pp. 30, 107, 242.

Clare admired Gray and strongly disapproved of Johnson's Life (see Prose p. 113). Gray's letters he considered "the best letters I have seen." (Prose p. 109.) His fondness for the Elegy may be demonstrated by his variations on Gray's opening stanza:

The ploughman mawls along the doughy sloughs
And often stop their songs to clean their ploughs
(SC, 31)

The mower seeks his cloaths and hides
His scythe home bent wi weary strides
And oer his shoulder swings his bag
Bearing in hand his empty cag
Hay makers on their homward [sic] way
Into the fields will often stray
Among the grain when no one sees
Nestle and fill their laps wi peas ... (SC, 87)

The weary thresher leaves his barn
And emptys from his shoes the corn
That gatherd in them thro the day
And homward bends his weary way (SC, 92)

Note also: "Far from the ruder worlds inglorious din" (SPP, 91). (See also Collins above.)

HARTLEY pp. 55-6, 180.

HAZLITT

"... he is one of the very best prose-writers of the present day & his works are always entertaining." (Prose p. 116.)

Clare's brilliant portrait of Hazlitt, "a silent picture of severity," is in Prose, p. 88.

HOGG

"Has Hogg visited London yet when he does tell me & I'm d — d if I dont muster up every atom of my possibility to have a sight of him." (Letters p. 246.) (They did not meet.)

Clare possessed 7 volumes of Hogg's poems.

HOOD

Clare's sketch of Hood has been lost; Hood's of Clare is in Hood's Own (London, 1839) — see Life pp. 178-80.

KEATS pp. 68, 91, 120, 127, 133, 135, 175, 210, 213-14, 216, 219, 241.

"... for his feeling his love for nature & his genius I heartily love him." (Letters p. 51.)

" ... he launches on the sea without compass — & mounts pegassus without saddle or bridle." (Letters p. 56.)

Clare anxiously looked forward to meeting Keats (they shared the same publisher) but it was not to be.

Clare's oft-quoted criticism of Keats, and Keats's of Clare, are to be found in Prose p. 223 and Storey p. 122 respectively.

Clare's sonnet on the death of Keats is in JCSP, 64.

His sonnet "To Autumn" (PJC, I, 283) has a Keatsian flavour, as has the occasional line like "With all the warmth of a moon-struck brain" (PJC, I, 235).

Thomas Moulton compares Clare and Keats in "The Poetry of the Green Man" in English Review, Feb. 1921, 186-9; Storey pp. 346-8.

(See also Wordsworth below.)

Koran

Clare quotes from the Koran in MS. 110 (LPJC, 137).

LAMB pp. 57, 226.

Clare's portrait of Lamb is in Prose p. 89, and his sonnets to him are in JCSP, 136 and 194.

Metaphysical and Seventeenth Century Poets p. xiv.

For a comparison between Clare's poetry and that of the metaphysical and cavalier poets, both in style and in outlook, see E.J. Bush, "The Poetry of John Clare," Dissertation Abstracts, 32 (1971), 3295A (Wisconsin); microfilm pp. 322-5. Clare had some acquaintance with Butler, Carew, Cowley, Donne (see Pope below), Herbert, Waller, and Dryden. There is a hint of Herrick in his "The Greenwood Side" (PJC, II, 296-7). " ... the Lyrics of Suckling have never been surpassed & only equaled by Shakespeare." (Letters p. 256.) See Walton below.

MILTON pp. 63, 165.

" ... the opening & end of Paradise Lost I consider sublime ... 'Comus' & 'L'Allegro' & 'Il Penseroso' are those which I take up oftenest ... " (Prose p. 109.) One of Clare's Elizabethan imitations is addressed "To John Milton" (JCSP, 206-8). Clare's "Address to Plenty" (JCSP, 13-20), "Noon" (CSPP, 50-2), and "Summer Evening" (CSPP, 57-63) have the "L'Allegro" metre, though Clare may also have learnt it from Dyer's "Grongar Hill". Shelley's "Lines Written among the Euganean Hills" are, as Herbert Grierson points out (Lyrical Poetry from Blake to Hardy; London: Hogarth Press, 1928; p. 60), in the same metre, but were published after Clare's three poems were written. Clare's lines "And joy holds both his sides together / Before he laughs" (PJC, II, 290) are clearly indebted to "L'Allegro". (See also Thomson below.)

MONTGOMERY

" ... the reading of no poem ever left such an impression on my fondness for poetry as his 'Common Lot' did ... " (Letters p. 188.)

Clare corresponded with Montgomery in 1825-26.

POPE p. 162.

" ... the Pastorals are nicknamed so for daffodils breathing flutes beachen bowls silver crooks purling brooks & such like everlasting singsong does not make pastorals." (Prose pp. 117-18.)

Clare's later high praise for Pope, "a great poet", is recorded in Prose pp. 222-3. The following passage from "Shadows of Taste" contains some excellent imitation:

Styles may with fashions vary — tawdry chaste
Have had their votaries which each fancied taste
From Donns [sic] old homely gold whose broken feet
Jostles the readers patience from its seat
To Popes smooth rhymes that regularly play
In musics stated periods all the way
That starts and closes starts again and times
Its tuning gamut true as minster chimes
From these old fashions stranger metres flow
Half prose half verse that stagger as they go
One line starts smooth and then for room perplex
Elbows along and knocks against the next
And half its neighbour where a pause marks time
There the clause ends what follows is for rhyme
(CSPP, 150-1)

REYNOLDS p. 51.

" ... his 'Shrewsbury' I admire exceedingly ... " (Letters p. 55.)

" ... I myself woud sooner be the author of this one poem ['Shrewsbury'] than [i.e. than] the half of what Southey Wordsworth &c have written." (Letters p. 123.)

Clare's portrait of Reynolds, "the most good-natured fellow I ever met with," is in Prose pp. 86-7.

Clare uses the "Shrewsbury" metre in "The Old Man's Lament" (PJC, II, 98-9) and "Remembrances" (CSPP, 193-6).

His "Village Minstrel" has similarities to Reynolds's "The Romance of Youth", but Clare did not know this poem at the time.

SHAFTESBURY pp. 20, 158, 180, 216.

SHELLEY pp. 68, 127, 159, 173, 182, 210, 220, 239.

Clare's "Autumn" (SPP, 134-7) uses some Shelleyan and Keatsian diction (e.g. "syren", "dewy", "unpremeditated", "winnowing", "tremulous").

(See also Milton above.)

SHENSTONE p. 234.

"Shenstone is a Good Poet but his Pastorals (as I think) are improperly called so the rural Names of Damon Delia Phillis &c & rural objects Sheep Sheepfolds &c&c are the only things that give one the slightest glimps [sic]

of the Species of Poetry which the Title claims — Putting the Correct Language of the Gentleman into the mouth of a Simple Shepherd or Vulgar Ploughman is far from Natural." (Letters p. 25.)

Clare translates an inscription by Shenstone in an asylum notebook — see Introduction to PJCM, p. 21. On the influence of Shenstone's "Pastoral Ballad" see Todd, op. cit. (s.v. Blake above), p. 194.

SMART pp. 89, 187, 242.

SMITH pp. 22-3.

"Clare's debt to her seems to have been in her precise and detailed imagery and in her willingness to include nature's most common phenomena as legitimate subjects for poetic treatment in the sonnet." (M.G. Minor, "The Poet in his Joy ...," Dissertation Abstracts, 31 (1971), 4784A (Ohio State); microfilm pp. 72-3.)

SOUTHEY p. 142.

"Southey and Crabb [sic] I fancy I can do [i.e. parody] to a tittle the ones affectation in mouthing over big words & the others tedious prosing over trifles often border on the ridiculous tho they are both great men & geniuses as I venerate & esteem." (Letters p. 133.)

"... a lively sort of man always in gay spirits who wrote both in prose & verse with a great deal of ease ... " (Prose p. 92.)

Clare was not included in Southey's Uneducated Poets (1830) — "Mr Southey seems to hold uneducated poets in very little estimation & talks about the march of mind in a sneering way ... " (Letters p. 254.)

THOMSON pp. 2-3, 5, 6, 10, 18, 20, 53, 72, 104, 106, 111, 150, 157, 165, 173, 178, 179, 205-6, 232-3, 242.

"I read Thomson's Seasons & Milton's Paradise Lost thro when I was a boy & they are the only books of poetry that I have regularly read thro." (Prose p. 78.)

"... how natural all his descriptions are nature was consulted in all of them the more I read them the more truth I discover." (Prose p. 122.)

For reference to Thomson in Clare's poetry see PJC, I, 366 and JCSP, 136.

A great many of Clare's poems have their origins in Thomson's genre-sketches.

For the most sustained comparison see John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840 (Cambridge University Press, 1972).

WALTON

The Compleat Angler "is the best English pastoral that can be written the descriptions are nature unsullied by fashionable tastes of the times " (Prose p. 103) ... "tho I never caught any more fish then usual by its instructions." (Prose p. 51.)

Clare has a sonnet to Walton in JCSP, 137-8. In his "Excursion with 'The Angler'" (Prose pp. 234-6) Clare records a fantasy in which he joins Walton, Wotton,

Raleigh, Donne, Cotton, Herbert, and Hooker for an afternoon's fishing and reciting; they hear a maiden singing a song by Marlowe.

WHITE pp. 38, 167.

Clare makes only passing reference to White in his letters and prose.

WORDSWORTH pp. 8-9, 22, 39, 57, 61-2, 68, 80, 82-4, 93, 118-20, 125, 127, 142, 144, 146, 148, 159, 162, 166, 173, 174, 175, 177, 180-1, 224, 241, 242.

"When I first began to read poetry I disliked Wordsworth [sic] because I heard he was disliked & I was astonished when I looked into him to find my mistaken pleasure in being delighted & finding him so natural & beautiful ... " (Prose p. 118.)

Clare's asylum sonnet to Wordsworth is printed in PJCM, 60.

"If Wordsworth and Coleridge helped [Clare] to meaning, relation and harmony, it was help received and not plagiarism committed." (G. Grigson, Introduction to Selected Poems of John Clare; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950; p. 16; Storey p. 410.)

Middleton Murry's comparison is unfair to Clare:

"Wordsworth's incessant effort to comprehend experience would itself have been incomprehensible to Clare; Keats's consuming passion to make his poetry adequate not merely in content but also in the very mechanism of expression to an emotional experience more overwhelming even than Wordsworth's would have seemed to him like a problem of metaphysics to a ploughboy."

(Times Literary Supplement, 13 Jan. 1921, 17-18; rpt. John Clare and Other Studies; London: Nevill, 1950; pp. 8-9; Storey p. 331.)

For further comparisons see Murry, "Clare and Wordsworth" in T.L.S., 21 Aug. 1924, 511 (rpt. John Clare and Other Studies, pp. 19-24; Storey pp. 359-64); Harold Bloom, op. cit. (s.v. Blake above), pp. 444-56 (Storey pp. 428-39); and Janet Todd, op. cit. (s.v. Blake above), pp. 69-74.

BIBLIOGRAPHY, Part I

The following bibliography, which I compiled in the course of my research, was to have appeared in *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 31, no. 4 (1974), but publication has been delayed until mid-1975. Except for a few corrections to be made to the proofs (see corrigenda at end), it is here presented in ready-to-print form. Items which have come to my notice since submission of the manuscript for publication are appended as addenda.

John Clare

A Chronological Bibliography

including editions since the poet's lifetime, biographies, bibliographies, reviews, articles, and other critical material

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This bibliography amplifies and continues select checklists compiled variously by C. Dack, C.E. Smith, Edmund Blunden and J.W. and Anne Tibble, cited in section A below. Section A includes editions of Clare's works since his lifetime, biographies, bibliographies, and important miscellanea. Section B lists over one hundred books and pamphlets containing important references to Clare, or, in one or two cases, important background material which has qualified them for inclusion in earlier Clare bibliographies. Section C contains the most noteworthy reviews of the most useful works cited in sections A and B, covering the period 1920 to 1967. Section D lists articles, dissertations, correspondence, etc., with particular attention to post-1920 (post-Blunden) contributions. The first hundred years of section D include various reviews, reminiscences and notices, many of which have been noted by J.W. and Anne Tibble in their revised edition of *John Clare: A Life*, 1972 (see especially pp. 105-6, 159, 243 and 322-3), and have more recently been reprinted by Mark Storey in his *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, 1973, to which readers are referred for an excellent coverage of this period.

All major research and reviews published since this bibliography will be found in the annual surveys of *English Language Notes* (September supp.) and the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*.

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SECTION C: SELECTED REVIEWS, 1920-1967

Abbreviations

Adel. *Adelphi*
 Athen. *Athenaeum*
 Bk. *World Book Week*
 Bks. and Bkman. *Books and Bookmen*
 Bookm. *Bookman*
 BT *Boston Transcript*
 Cath. Lib. *Catholic Library World*
 CR *Contemporary Review*
 Cweal. *Commonweal*
 EA *Etudes Anglaises*
 En. *Encounter*
 Eng. *English*
 Eng. Rev. *English Review*
 Fort. Rev. *Fortnightly Review*
 Horn Bk. *Horn Book*
 Lib. Jnl. *Library Journal*
 Lib. Rev. *Library Review*
 List. *Listener*
 LL *Life and Letters*
 LM *London Magazine*
 Merc. *Mercury*
 MLR *Modern Language Review*
 MP *Morning Post*
 Nat. *Nation*
 N.-Athen. *Nation-Athenaeum*
 NQ *Notes and Queries*
 NR *News Republic*
 NS *New Statesman*
 NSN *New Statesman and Nation*
 N. Yorker *New Yorker*
 NYTB *New York Times Book Review*
 Obs. *Observer*
 PA *Peterborough Advertiser*
 RES *Review of English Studies*
 Sat. Rev. *Saturday Review*
 SEL *Studies in English Literature*
 Spec. *Spectator*
 SRL *Saturday Review of Literature*
 ST *Sunday Times*
 TLS *Times Literary Supplement*
 TT *Time and Tide*
 VS *Victorian Studies*
 WER *Week End Review*

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1968, p. 662; Carl Woodring, SEL, 8, 1968, p.
730.

SECTION D: ARTICLES, CORRESPONDENCE,
DISSERTATIONS, AND SOME
EARLY REVIEWS, ETC. (see introduction.)

- 1820 (Mainly reviews of *Poems Descriptive*, ac-
counts of Clare's origins, and corre-
spondence.)
— *London Magazine*, Jan., pp. 7-11 (O.
Gilchrist).
— *New Times*, 21 Jan.
— *Literary Chronicle*, 29 Jan., pp. 71-2.
— *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Jan.
— *Gentleman's Magazine*, Feb., pp. 146-9.
— *Morning Post*, 8 Feb. (lines by Mrs. Emmer-
son).
— *Morning Post*, 11 Feb. ('A Well-Wisher to
Merit').
— *Northamptonshire County Magazine*, Feb.
— *Morning Post*, 3 Mar.
— *New Monthly*, Mar., pp. 326-30.
— *Monthly Review*, Mar., pp. 296-300.
— *Monthly Magazine*, Mar., p. 164.
— *London Magazine*, Mar., pp. 323-8 (J. Scott).
— *Eclectic Review*, Apr., pp. 327-40 (J.
Conder?).
— *Lady's Monthly Museum*, Apr., pp. 220-2.
— *Quarterly Review*, May, pp. 166-74 (O.
Gilchrist).
— *Morning Post*, 15 May (lines by C.H. Town-
send and a letter probably by Capt. M.E.
Sherwill).
— *Morning Post*, 19 May.
— *New Times*, 24 May.
— *Guardian*, 28 May, pp. 100-1.
— *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, June, p.
322 (J.G. Lockhart).
— *British Critic*, June, pp. 662-7.
— *Antijacobin Review*, June, pp. 348-53.
— *Monthly Magazine*, July.
— *Analectic Magazine* (U.S.A.).
— *Annual Register*.
1821 (Mainly reviews of *The Village Minstrel* and
comments on Clare's progress.)
— *Gentleman's Magazine*, Jan. and Apr., pp.
32-5 and 308-12 ('E.P.').
— *British Critic*, June, pp. 660-61.
— *Literary Gazette*, 6 Oct., pp. 625-8.
— *Literary Chronicle*, 6 Oct., pp. 623-5.
— *Literary Chronicle*, 21 Oct., pp. 665-6.
— *Gentleman's Magazine*, Oct., pp. 344-7.
— *Monthly Magazine*, Nov., pp. 321-5.
— *London Magazine*, Nov., pp. 540-8 (J. Taylor).
— *European Magazine*, Nov., pp. 453-8.
— *New Monthly*, Nov., p. 579.
1822 *Eclectic Review*, Jan., pp. 31-45 (J. Conder?).
1823 *London Magazine*, Jan. and Feb. (T.G. Waine-
wright).
1824 *London Magazine*, Aug., pp. 143-5 (lines by
C.A. Elton).
1827 (Mainly reviews of *The Shepherd's Calendar*
and brief notices of Clare's continued
activity.)
— *Literary Gazette*, 31 Mar., p. 195.
— *Eclectic Review*, June, pp. 509-21 (J.
Conder).
— *London Weekly Review*, 9 June, p. 7.
— *Literary Chronicle*, 27 Oct., pp. 674-5.

- *John Bull*; *Morning Chronicle*; *Literary Mag-
net*; *Monthly Magazine*; *Blackwood's*
(brief notices).
1829 *British Almanac and Companion*.
1831 *Blackwood's*.
1832 *True Sun*, Aug.
— *Athenaeum*, 25 Aug. (see Tibble: *John Clare:
A Life*, 1972 edn., p. 315.)
— *The Alfred*, Oct. (see Tibble, op. cit., p. 315).
— *Athenaeum*, 13 Oct. (A. Cunningham; see
Tibble, op. cit., p. 316).
1835 (Mainly reviews of *The Rural Muse*, Clare's
last volume.)
— *Athenaeum*, 25 July, pp. 566-7.
— *Literary Gazette*, 25 July, pp. 465-6.
— *Blackwood's*, July, pp. 231-47 (J. Wilson).
— *New Monthly*, Aug., p. 510.
— *Druid's Monthly Magazine*, n.s. 2, pp. 131-4.
1840 *Athenaeum*, 27 June (see Tibble, op. cit., p.
340).
— *Times*, 17 and 23 June (M. Allen; see Tibble,
op. cit., p. 340).
— *London Saturday Journal*, 25 July (see
Tibble, op. cit., p. 340).
— *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, Dec., pp. 771-2
(T. De Quincey).
1841 *Athenaeum*, 8 May (M. Allen).
— *English Journal*, 15 and 29 May, pp. 305-9
and 340-3 (C. Redding).
— *Gentleman's Magazine*, May.
1847-9 *Bedford Times*, passim (see Tibble, op. cit., p.
379).
1852 *Notes and Queries*, 28 Aug.
1855 *Illustrated London News*, 31 Mar.
1857 *Quarterly Review*, Jan., pp. 1-56 (T. James).
— *London Journal*, 21 Nov.
— *Notes and Queries*, Jan.-June, vol. 5.
1860 *Living Age* (U.S.A.).
1861 *Once a Week*, 11 May, pp. 539-41 (J.R.
Plummer).
1863 *Notes and Queries*, 31 Oct.
— *Once a Week*.
1864 (Mainly obituaries.)
— *Northampton Mercury*, 28 May, p. 7 (lines by
J. Askham).
— *Northampton Mercury*, 4 June, p. 3 (lines by
J.W. Dalby).
— *Gentleman's Magazine*, July.
— *St. James's Magazine*, July, pp. 438-47 (J.R.
Plummer).
— *Athenaeum*, Aug. and Oct.
— *Annual Register*.
1865 *Athenaeum*, 17 June.
— *Examiner*, 5 Aug.
— *Eclectic Review*, Aug., pp. 101-38 (E.P.
Hood).
— *Leisure Hour*, 11 Nov.
— *Chambers' Journal*.
— *Spectator*.
1866 *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Jan.
1867 *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Feb., pp.
39-43.
1869 *Harper's New Monthly*, Nov., pp. 882-6.
1870 *Literary World*, 17 June.
1872 *Notes and Queries*, 3 Feb.
1873 (For a selection of reviews of Cherry's volume
see Mark Storey, ed.: *Clare: The Critical
Heritage*, pp. 16; 289-91; reviews were
carried by 'practically every provincial
newspaper', as well as by the London
magazines.)
— *Notes and Queries* (J.H. Dixon; see Tibble,
op. cit., p. 234).
— *Overland Monthly*, Feb., pp. 134-41 (U.S.A.).
1874 *Notes and Queries*, 17 Oct.

- 1877 *Living Age*.
 1886 *Northamptonshire Notes and Queries*, vol. 97.
 1890 *Notes and Queries*, 6 Sept.
 — *All the Year Round*, 13 Dec.
 1893 *Literary World*, 8 Sept., p. 173 (J. Hall).
 — *Literary World*, 15 Sept., p. 189 (C.E. Smith).
 1901 *Current Literature*, July (U.S.A.).
 — *Freethinker*.
 — *Monthly Review*.
 1902 *Gentleman's Magazine*, Apr.
 1908 *Nation*, 17 Dec. (U.S.A.).
 1909 *Current Literature*, Mar. (U.S.A.).
 — *T.P.'s Weekly*, 26 Feb., p. 266.
 1913 *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Jan., pp. 50-59
 (H. Peckman) (U.S.A.).
 1914 *Yale Review*, Oct. pp. 87-94 (H. Walker)
 (U.S.A.).
 1915 *Fortnightly Review*, May, pp. 974-82 (J.
 Vaughan).
 1917 *Dial*, 19 July (U.S.A.).
 1918 *Fortnightly Review*, Oct.
 1920 *Nation*, 22 Feb.
 — *Athenaeum*, Mar., 9 Apr., Oct., and Nov.
 — *Peterborough Citizen*, Mar., Sept., and Nov.
 — *Oxford Outlook*, May, pp. 202-9 (A. Porter).
 — *London Mercury*, July, pp. 316-26.
 — *Poetry Review*, Sept. and Oct., pp. 260-4 (S.
 Looker).
 1921 (See reviews of Blunden and Porter.)
 — *Athenaeum*, Jan.
 — *Sunday Times*, Jan. (S. Sefton).
 — *Peterborough Citizen*, 1 Feb.
 — Moulton, Thomas. "The Poetry of the Green
 Man." *English Review*, Feb., pp. 186-9.
 — Hewlett, Maurice. "Clare's Derivations."
Cornhill Magazine, Mar., n.s. no. 297,
 pp. 274-81.
 — "Unpublished Writings of Clare." *Athenaeum*,
 9 Apr.
 — Blunden, Edmund. "The Return of John
 Clare." *Discovery*, Aug., pp. 198-200.
 — *Cornhill Magazine*, Sept.
 1922 *Bookman*, Oct.
 — *Nation*.
 1923 Blunden, Edmund. "Clare on 'The London-
 ers'." *Mercury*, Feb., 7, pp. 393-8.
 1924 (See reviews of Blunden.)
 — "An Unpublished Poem by John Clare ('Re-
 lease')." *Spectator*, 23 Aug., p. 259.
 1925 Taylor, Olive. "John Taylor, Author and
 Publisher." *London Mercury*, July, p.
 262.
 — Porter, Alan. "Notes for an Autobiography,
 (Clare)." *Spectator*, 19-26 Sept. and 3
 Oct.
 1929 Tibble, J.W. "The Emmersons and John
 Clare." *Times Literary Supplement*, 5
 Dec., p. 1032.
 1930 Hughes, T.R. "Percy Green, Alias John
 Clare." *Times Literary Supplement*, 10
 July, pp. 575-6.
 1931 (See reviews of Blunden.)
 — Kirby, H.T. "The Clare Country." *Saturday*
Review, 14 Mar., p. 371.
 — *Current Literature*, Apr.
 1932 (See reviews of Tibble.)
 1935 (See reviews of Tibble.)
 — Kirby, H.T. "John Clare." *Times Literary*
Supplement, 7 Mar., p. 143.
 — Kirby, H.T. "Notes on Clare." *Bookmark*,
 Spring.
 — Burke, J.T.A. "John Clare." *Poetry Review*,
 June, 26, pp. 181-9.
 — Whiting, B.J. "Clare and the Nightingale."
Saturday Review of Literature, 5 Oct., p.
 11.
 1936 Norman, Sylva. "Lines to John Clare." *Times*
Literary Supplement, 31 Oct., p. 887.
 — Colton, Ruth M. "A Study of the Poetry of
 John Clare." M.A. thesis, Columbia.
 1937 Park, Julian. "Unpublished Poems by John
 Clare." *University of Buffalo Studies*,
 June, 14, pp. 54-67.
 1940 Warner, Paul S. "John Clare: Poet of Nature."
 M.A. thesis, Syracuse.
 1941 Chaning-Pearce, M. "John Clare." *Hibbert*
Journal, Apr., 39, pp. 291-8.
 — Callister, J.E. "Poet in Bondage." *Times*
Literary Supplement, 27 Dec., p. 657.
 1945 Kingsley, Elizabeth S. "The Crosties Club."
Saturday Review of Literature, 23 June,
 p. 47.
 1947 Tibble, J.W. and Anne. "John Clare's Prose."
Times Literary Supplement, 5 Apr., p.
 157.
 — Heath-Stubbs, J. "John Clare and the Peasant
 Tradition." *Penguin New Writing*, no.
 32, pp. 112-24; rpt. in *The Darkling*
Plain, 1950.
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Literary Supplement, 7 Feb., p. 79.
 — Wilshire, Lewis. "Poet and Peasant: John
 Clare." *English*, 7, pp. 68-72.
 1949 (See reviews of Grigson.)
 — Rollins, Hyder E. "A Poem by John Clare."
Harvard Library Bulletin, Winter, 3, pp.
 147-8.
 1950 "A Fragment by John Clare ('Autumn', from
 Northampton Ms.)." *Times Literary Sup-*
plement, 8 Dec., p. 792.
 — Nicholes, Eleanor L. "The Shadowed Mind: a
 study of the change in style of the
 poetry of John Clare resulting from the
 effects of the schizophrenic process."
 Diss. New York.
 — Errera, Lea. "John Clare the Northampton-
 shire Peasant Poet." M.A. thesis, Ca
 Foscari, Italy.
 1951 (See reviews of Grigson, Murry, Wilson, and
 Tibble.)
 — Loveman, S. "From Clare to Taylor." *Times*
Literary Supplement, 13 Apr., p. 229.
 — Tibble, J.W. and Anne. "The Manuscripts of
 John Clare." *Times Literary Sup-*
plement, 20 Apr., p. 245.
 — *Illustrated London News*, June.
 — Vallette, J. "John Clare." *Mercure de France*,
 Sept., 313, pp. 143-5.
 1952 Wake, J. "Early Days of the Northampton
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amptonshire Past and Present, 1.
 1953 Tennent, Dr. Thomas. "Insanity and Genius."
Journal of Mental Science, Jan., 99, no.
 414.
 1954 (See reviews of Reeves and Unwin.)
 1955 Brown, T.J. "English Literary Autographs,
 no. 14: John Clare, 1793-1864." *Book*
Collector, Summer, 4, p. 147.
 — Graves, Robert. "Peasant Poet." *Hudson*
Review, Autumn, 8, pp. 99-105.
 — Perring, F.H. "John Clare and Northampton-
 shire Plant Records." Rpt. from *Pro-*
ceedings of the Botanical Society of the
British Isles, Oct.
 — Grigson, Geoffrey. "Integrity and John
 Clare." *Listener*, 3 Nov., pp. 743-4.
 — Gregor, Ian. "The Last Augustan." *Dublin*
Review, 229 (first quarter), pp. 37-50
 (esp. pp. 46-8).
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CORRIGENDA

In section B the Raymond Williams entry belongs to 1973, not 1972. In section D, against the year 1913, read Peckham, not Peckman; and against the year 1915 read pp. 874-82, not 974-82.

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